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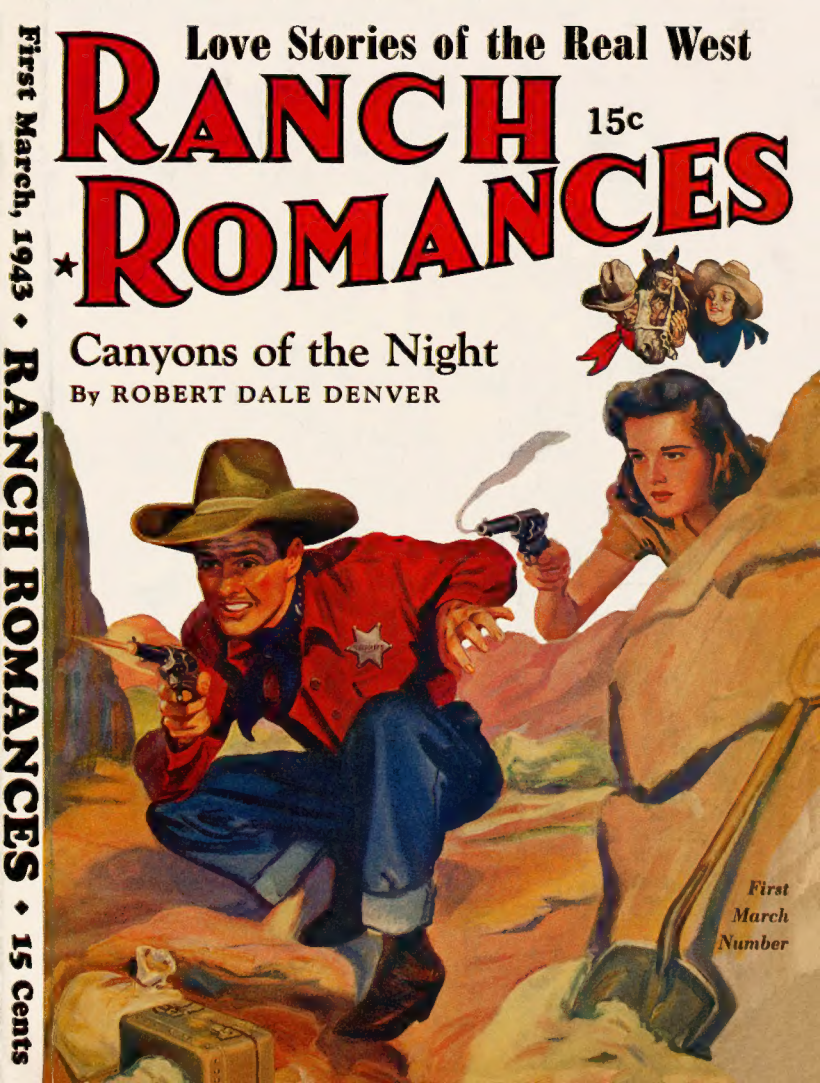
Love Stories of the Real West

# RANCH ROMANCES

15c

## Canyons of the Night

By ROBERT DALE DENVER



First March Number

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## Canyons of the Night

By ROBERT DALE DENVER

First March Number

*"You're in the Army now,*
*You're not behind the plow,*
*While doing the hitch*
*Fight flakes and itch . . .*

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# RANCH ROMANCES

Vol. 111
No. 3

*FANNY ELLSWORTH*
*Editor*

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# Canyons of the Night

## By Robert Dale Denver

***It was a tortured country, racked by the plotting of greedy men. And to these Canyons of The Night a man and girl came, each for a different reason, to find that their destinies lay in bringing light to this land together.***

### CHAPTER I

*Enemy Country*

BETWEEN high blood-red canyon walls the trail ran snakily, crossing and recrossing a noisy little creek. Along the road two chunky gray horses were pulling a covered Studebaker wagon, with a tarp patched in variegated shades stretched over its bows. Driving was a gray-mustached, pleasant-faced rancher puffing contentedly on a pipe.

Following the wagon came six loose saddle horses, hazed along by a pretty dark-eyed girl sitting a blood-bay gelding with a careless, thistle-like grace. Dressed in gray breeches, woolen shirt, a flat-crowned sombrero, she looked to be a youngster of fifteen or sixteen, but Jean Carvel was past eighteen. As the wagon and the horses passed through the sun and shadow of the canyon, she began whistling a gay, somewhat intricate tune which her father, the driver, had often played on what their rancher neighbors called a fiddle—in reality an expensive violin.

In the wagon Dan Carvel, nodding in time with the whistled music, suddenly hauled back on the reins. Making a sharp turn about a cliff shaped like a boat's prow, the team had run into half a dozen horsemen drawn up in a line.

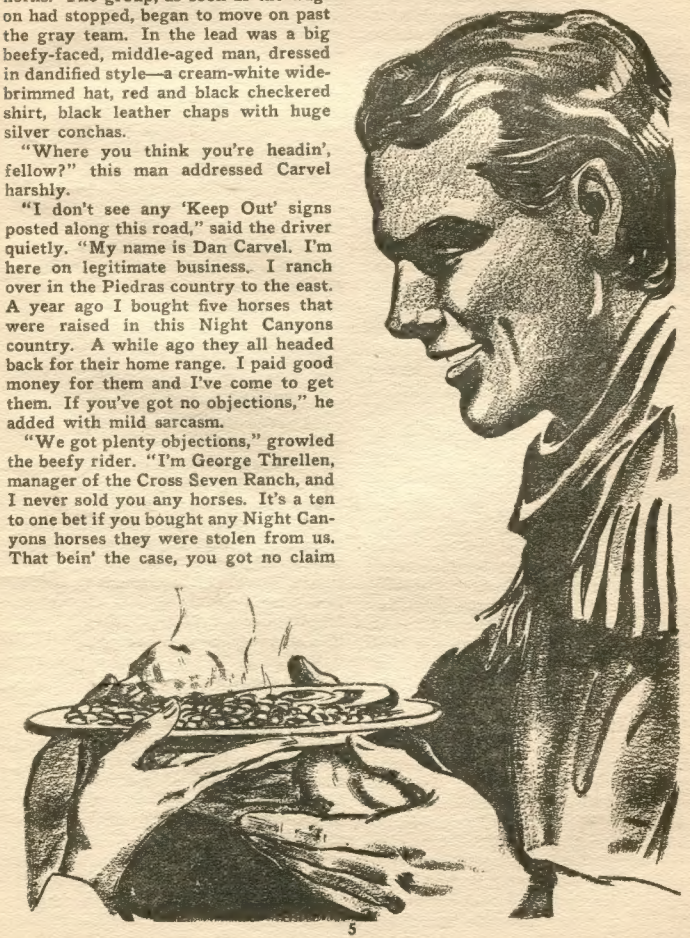
A battle line, plainly, for four of the riders held rifles above their saddle horns. The group, as soon as the wagon had stopped, began to move on past the gray team. In the lead was a big beefy-faced, middle-aged man, dressed in dandified style—a cream-white wide-brimmed hat, red and black checkered shirt, black leather chaps with huge silver conchas.

"Where you think you're headin', fellow?" this man addressed Carvel harshly.

"I don't see any 'Keep Out' signs posted along this road," said the driver quietly. "My name is Dan Carvel. I'm here on legitimate business. I ranch over in the Piedras country to the east. A year ago I bought five horses that were raised in this Night Canyons country. A while ago they all headed back for their home range. I paid good money for them and I've come to get them. If you've got no objections," he added with mild sarcasm.

"We got plenty objections," growled the beefy rider. "I'm George Threllen, manager of the Cross Seven Ranch, and I never sold you any horses. It's a ten to one bet if you bought any Night Canyons horses they were stolen from us. That bein' the case, you got no claim to 'em. Turn your outfit and hightail it out of here."

The girl's father eyed the six riders, and the mild look left his face, to be



replaced by one of stubborn determination. "That sounds like an order, Threllen," Carvel stated. "And I don't work for you or the Cross Seven. Furthermore, all this Night River country except the little used for ranch headquarters is government land—never has been homesteaded. It's still public domain, and as a citizen I've got the right to travel over it on my business. I've got a bill of sale from the Garys in Dawn Canyon for those horses, with proper descriptions and brands, and those brands weren't Cross Seven and they had not been blotted. After I find my stray horses, you can look them over to see if you've got any claim or title to them."

Threllen's big face turned redder, his almost colorless eyes began to glow. "A bunch of thieves, all the Garys!" he stormed. "The whole tribe of 'em and their neighbors—thieves and worse. Killers. Murderers. I'm giving you one last chance: Git outa here or else."

"Or else what?" inquired Carvel unperturbed, but his calm had just the opposite of a quieting effect on Threllen. The rider's big hand fell to the six-shooter in his holster, but as the ugly snout of the gun came up, Jean Carvel spurred past the wagon to push the blood-bay in between her father and Threllen. At this Threllen's horse shied, starting his rider to swearing and spurring. Then as the rowelling made the horse sheep jump, Threllen holstered his six-shooter to use both hands to jerk the animal's mouth savagely.

Sitting her blood bay meanwhile, Jean Carvel, her dark eyes luminous, angrily surveyed the group of them. All of them, in unconscious compliment to the girl's looks, straightened a little in their saddles. One horse-faced man, black bearded as a Biblical character, with greasy black hair curling from under a torn sombrero, grinned in a loose-lipped way and slyly began edging his horse closer to the girl's. She was talking to her father.

"Dad, do what they say!" she urged. "You have no chance against six armed men. Turn the team around; let's go back."

Dan Carvel shook his head. "No, Jean, I'm going on." The girl's gray-mustached father was one of those quiet men whose anger can equal in intensity the loud-mouthed rage represented by Threllen's blustering sort. "I know I've got no chance against them," he admitted. "All I've got is a shotgun in the wagon, loaded with birdshot. But a man has a right to travel over government land on his own business, and I'm not turning back. They won't touch you, Jean. If they harm me, you ride back and notify the sheriff."

He spoke to the team and the wagon rolled on through the riders. For a few yards it was allowed to proceed, then the Cross Seven manager, Threllen, barked an order. Two men at once spurred after the grays to lean down and seize their bits. Again the outfit halted. Threllen, still yanking viciously on the bloodied mouth of his horse, came up on the off side of the wagon, opposite Jean Carvel.

"Shooting has been what we handed people passing through here after we warned 'em to keep out," he snarled at Carvel. "But we'd hate to shoot down a father in front of his own girl, so we'll make it a quirtin' for you—as a special favor. Grab him, some of you, and truss him up against that pine. Maybe losing a little hide will teach him we mean what we say. Yank him down."

For a few moments, under the blood-red cliff walls, there was a struggle—a desperate but hopeless one. Pushing past Jean Carvel, two men had dismounted to climb over a wheel, planning to drag her father from his seat. Behind them, the girl took down her lariat, intending to drop a loop over the pair.

"Stop that she-cat, Hake!" yelled Threllen, and the man with the curly black beard came in to snatch away the rope. Then dropping the lariat, he caught the girl's wrists in his hands.

Meanwhile Dan Carvel had landed one hard blow on the jaw of the lank cowboy reaching for him. Promptly the cowboy fell back over the wheel, hitting the ground hard. Two other cowboys, however, seized Carvel, and despite his savage fighting brought him to the ground. Here they tore off his shirt and undershirt, and a few moments later Dan Carvel's body, bare above the waist, was plastered against the rough reddish bark of a pine. Then his arms were bent around the trunk and the wrists lashed together with a length of thong leather. After that, at a word from Threllen, the lank cowboy that Carvel had hit in the jaw went to get a quirt from his saddle.

Jean Carvel, her wrists in the vise of the big hands of the man Threllen had called Hake, tried vainly to break loose, while her blood-bay danced nervously. Hake chuckled and grasping both her wrists in one big wide paw, he put the freed arm around the girl, drawing her slim body close to him.

"You ain't no she-cat; you're just a little pigeon, that's what you are," he murmured. "Cutest little pigeon I ever laid eyes on."

"Don't you dare hit him!" Jean Carvel screamed as she struggled furiously to get loose. The girl was beside herself with horror and anger. Looking for some way to free herself, she glanced down at Hake's knee, covered only by a pair of levis. Bringing up one leg agilely, she jammed the spur wheel against the man's leg.

A loud squall of pain came from Hake, and his grip on the girl's hands slackened. Jean jerked them loose and reached for Hake's six-shooter, riding in a holster at his waist. The big hog-leg came out of leather, but Threllen was coming in on her left, crashing his horse deliberately into the girl's blood-bay. Jean clung desperately to the six-shooter, but before she could use the weapon, Threllen had clamped her arms to her sides. Next instant he twisted the gun roughly from her hand.

The weapon fell to the ground, and with it went the girl's slim chance of helping her father. Hake had captured her wrists again and was twisting them cruelly. Jean began crying, not because of the pain but in pity for her father.

"Let him have it, Quinn!" yelled Threllen to the man with the quirt. "And we ought to give his wild-cat daughter a dose of the same medicine!"

The man lifted the quirt high over Dan Carvel's bare back, but before the blow could fall, a clatter of hoofs sounded and another rider came out of the trees down canyon. A young woman riding side saddle and dressed in an impractical garb for range country —a long green riding habit topped by a sombrero as a concession doubtless to the strong Southwestern sun. She was blonde, tall, slender—too slender for vigorous health, the face too thin for beauty. Her eyes, a deep blue in color, were dull, dead, with a definite look of haunting melancholy. She rode straight to the tree to which Dan Carvel was bound.

"I asked you to wait down canyon for us, Miss Linda," said Threllen.

"What are you doing here?" the girl returned. "What has this man done, Threllen? Who is he?"

"You can see for yourself what we're doin'," Threllen told her sullenly. "We never saw him before. Him and his daughter say they want to hunt some stray horses they claim they bought from the Garys. Most likely horses the Garys stole from us, if there was any horses like he claims. It's my idea he's a Gary spy. We can't allow no stranger in here on our range, you know that. Mr. Temple has given orders to stop anyone coming in on the ranch."

"If this man had intended any harm," the girl pointed out, "he wouldn't risk bringing in his own daughter. Since there's no other wagon road to Dawn Canyon he's entitled to travel through our range to the Gary ranch to get back his horses. Give him a reasonable time to find them and take them out. I don't understand why you have to count everyone as our enemies. You and Tem-

ple take it for granted that anyone coming into this country comes to do us harm."

"And we got a right to take that for granted!" burst out Threllen. "We didn't start what's been started in here. One of the Garys and a neighbor killed your father, didn't they? And they've killed five of our Cross Seven men, haven't they? It's us against the Garys and the rest of those ranchers in Dawn and Star Canyons. They've been stealin' our horses and now that they've started shootin' us down, we got to fight back. I'm having this man whipped so him and other men will learn to keep off our range." His voice had an almost fanatical earnestness.

"I say to turn him loose," said the girl sharply. "Lashing a man for just crossing our range is beastly and inhuman. Turn him loose."

Threllen evidently was having trouble in reaching a decision. A powerful man physically, with a huge store of vitality, he plainly was a slow thinker. The other men patiently waited for his orders. Except for the black-bearded man, Hake, they appeared to take little interest in the affair; it was just another job to them.

Having to make up his mind seemed to enrage Threllen almost to the point of bursting. His dark-colored face turned purple. He muttered to himself. Then, "All right, turn him loose," he ordered finally. "But listen to me, you!" he snarled at Carvel's back. "You can go on to the Garys. The road to Dawn Canyon turns up a side canyon to the right up there a ways. We'll give you three days to get back through here, and we'll look over any horses you take out. Turn the girl loose, Hake."

Freed, Carvel silently replaced his torn clothing. Then he addressed Threllen. "If you had had me whipped," he declared, "I'd have killed you some time for it." He would have said more, but Jean Carvel dismounted to lay a hand on her father's arm to urge him toward the wagon.

"And don't you turn a foot off that road to Dawn Canyon," said Threllen as a final word. "Don't hunt for horses on this range. If you brought 'em from the Garys they wouldn't of come back here."

"That turnin' off don't apply to you, little pigeon," the black-bearded Hake told Jean Carvel, his little pig-like eyes gleaming. "You can turn off any time you want to, just so you turn my way."

At this Carvel swung angrily on Hake, but the girl on the black horse spoke up. "Hake," she remarked in a voice that was suddenly like a whiplash, "keep a decent tongue in your head."

The Carvel wagon creaked on again, with the loose horses trailing after it. Jean Carvel rode over close to the girl in the riding habit. "Thank God you stopped them," she said in a low voice. "I'll never forget that. Never."

The rider of the black horse was at least three or four years older than Jean. She looked at Jean gravely now, as at a child, and then she smiled, sadly. "I'm only sorry it happened," she said. *"Adios."*

As the outfit went on, with the wagon wheels jolting hard over stones, the girl on the black horse looked after the slim graceful figure of Jean Carvel. In her blue eyes with the tragic cast was plain envy. Silently the whole group of Cross Seven riders watched until wagon and horses were out of sight; Lafe Hake with his loose-lipped smile keeping his small eyes fixed on the girl on the blood-bay.

Then Threllen frowned at the sun which was low enough to send a path of rays over the pines making a comb along the ridge. "Gettin' late," he muttered.

"Yes," agreed the woman on the black. "I wish I could trade places with that girl, Threllen. She seems really happy, without a worry. She's of the sun, while all of us that live here in these Night River Canyons are of the shadow. And there is nothing ahead for us but shadows."

Threllen looked somberly at his horse's ears. "We'll have the shadows cleared up 'fore long, Miss Linda," he said gravely. "And then we'll have plenty sun—all the sun there is for ourselves. We're due for a big ruckus, but when it's ended, we'll have those Garys wiped out and we'll have all the Canyons of the Night to ourselves." He spoke with the heavy conviction of a person who had few ideas, but had those few firmly fixed.

The woman shivered. "Let's go back," she said abruptly, and the group went along the canyon at a jog trot, two men riding a hundred yards in front, Threllen with Miss Linda and three men in the back. As they rode, the men kept rifles over their saddle horns, ready for instant use.

## CHAPTER II

### *Night Ambush*

BLDISH Andy Partle, who was Roane Brandon's partner on a small cattle ranch, was frequently heard to declare that his young partner had been born a few decades too late. Roane, Andy maintained, should have lived in the days when he could have trapped the Rockies in the company of Kit Carson, Jim Bridger and their kind. Roane liked hunting and catching wild mustangs more than he did ranching. The business of ranching often bored him, and at such times he would load a pack horse, whistle to a half-dozen hounds and ride back into isolated country to hunt and trap. A few weeks or months later, looking as wild as a wolf, he would reappear, ready for another stint of ranch work.

Two inches over six feet, loose, rangy, with a deep, good-humored voice, Roane Brandon in a buckskin quill-ornamented jacket made a striking figure lounging now against the bar of the Coulter saloon in the town of Hurley. After a trip of a hundred miles from their home, he and Andy Partle, a gray-mustached man of sixty, had ridden into Hurley that morning with two pack horses. Having made camp on the outskirts of the place and hobbled their horses, they had spent the hours since loafing about the town.

Standing with them now in the Coulter bar and gambling place was Fred Temple, president of the big Cross Seven Ranch Company. Temple was a transplanted Easterner, a city man, dressed in a business suit with English riding boots; a long-headed reddish-blond man of forty-five who would have looked entirely in place at a bank directors' meeting. Andy and Roane had practically forced their company on the rancher, Temple being the snobbish sort who did not readily pick up acquaintance with strangers. Andy and Roane were drinking beer, sparingly. Temple was drinking Scotch—a lot of it—and warming up a little under its influence.

The two had been lucky in having found Temple in town that day, but that was as far as their luck went. They had come to the Hurley country to make a deal with Temple for Cross Seven horses, but Temple had declared curtly that he had no horses for sale.

"The Cross Seven is not selling horses, I tell you," snapped Temple when Andy Partle brought up the matter for the third time. "They would need gathering and we haven't time to do that just now. We have more important matters to attend to."

"We'll do the gathering," offered Partle. "And we'd pay mighty good money for a hundred head or so that we got a chance to turn a profit on. We'll give you a hundred a piece for three- to five-year-old mares and geldings. That's mighty good money."

"Good money," admitted Temple, startled. "And you can make money paying that much for unbroken horses?"

"Yeah," stated Roane Brandon.

"These Night Canyon horses are some of the best in the West and they've got looks besides. We know a bunch of Easterners that will pay big money for horses to stock the ranch they just bought. We'll pay you a thousand dollars down now as earnest money, the rest when we tally out the hundred head."

For the first time Temple considered the deal. "The ranch could use that money," he said. "Those horses do us no good out there just running on the range. You say you can gather them yourself? They're hard to corral in those canyons."

"I know that country, Mr. Temple," said Andy Partle. "Like I told you, I rode for the Cross Seven some years ago. That's our offer—a hundred a piece for a hundred head, totaling ten thousand dollars."

Partle and Brandon, glancing at Temple, knew that the man was seriously turning over their offer. There was a "money" look in his light blue eyes.

"You've got the thousand dollars earnest money in cash?" he asked.

Andy Partle promptly pulled out a roll of bills, but another man had strolled up to the bar, stepping in between Temple and the other two. Partle recognized the proprietor of the saloon and gambling place, Gid Coulter. Andy had noticed him before, standing talking to a customer doing some solitary heavy drinking at a nearby table. The customer seemed vaguely familiar to Andy, but he had not been able to place him.

"Hello, Coulter," said Andy. "Still doing business at the old stand, I see. Many a dollar of hard-earned wages I lost in here a long time ago, when I worked for the Cross Seven."

"Nobody asked you to lose your money in here," Coulter rasped. The saloon man was tall and raw-boned, with a battered hook-nosed face. "Seems to me I heard you talking about selling some horses, Temple. Probably I heard wrong."

"It's mighty easy money, Coulter," said Temple. "Ten thousand dollars for a hundred head—that's the offer. We got so many horses out there running wild that they're eating the range poor."

"I wouldn't sell no horses now, Temple," growled Coulter. "Not with these other things to attend to. Step back in the office and we'll talk it over."

Coulter's voice was uncompromising and harsh. It was the wrong tone to use on Temple, who had had too many drinks of Scotch.

"What's there to talk over?" he returned arrogantly. "I'm president of the Cross Seven, and capable, I trust, of running its affairs. We need money. What's a better way to get it than to sell horses? I'll take your offer," he told Andy Partle and Roane Brandon. "Hand over that money and I'll give you a receipt."

"It would be businesslike, I guess, to have a sales agreement besides a receipt," said Roane Brandon and, taking a pencil and sheet of paper from a pocket, he began writing on the bar top.

"Now look here, Temple!" put in Coulter. "I say we'll talk this over first. You're drunk and don't know what you're doing."

Temple, who was a plain snob when sober and worse when drunk, turned on the saloon man. "My dear Coulter," he said sarcastically, "will you kindly concern yourself with your own business?"

"All right!" growled Coulter abruptly, and his greenish eyes held a glare that boded no good for Temple. "Have it your own way." He retreated to his office, staying there while the deal for the horses was completed, the sales agreement signed and the thousand dollars paid over.

During that interval the hard-drinking customer at the table had gotten up to stroll into Coulter's private office, closing the door behind him.

Temple tucked the money in his pocket and promptly left the saloon. Brandon and Partle were about to follow when Gid Coulter emerged from his office and strode toward them.

"You men probably think you've made a good deal," he remarked, trying hard to appear friendly. "But there's a war on in those Canyons of the Night. You'll get shot if you go in —by one side or the other. The Garys and the McWhirters and the Neils got two of the seven canyons on the east side of the river, and the Cross Seven has the other five. They been fightin' to see who gets them all. The principal owner of the Cross Seven, Addi-

ROANE BRANDON

son Stevens, was killed in a gun battle not long ago. This city dude Temple who's running the ranch has no more business managin' a horse ranch than I got ramroddin' a Sunday-school. If I were you, I'd keep out of that fight. Temple and his punchers can't protect you from the Garys and their neighbors."

"The Garys used to be decent folks when I worked here before," remarked Andy. "Tough now, are they?"

"Tough! You bet they're tough. I wouldn't ride through those canyons now for all the horses in the West. Five of the Cross Seven men been killed, besides Addison Stevens."

"You take a lot of interest in our health," said Roane coolly. "I'd like to ask why?"

Coulter stared at Brandon hard. "You could ask," he rasped out, "and I'd tell you that it's none of your damned business, except that it happens I don't want you or anybody else in that country. Is that plain?"

The saloon man had raised his voice suddenly so that his words could be heard over the entire room. Roane and Partle quickly glanced about them. The gambling establishment in the Coulter saloon occupied over half of the big room. A half-dozen dealers were on duty, lounging about their tables and layouts, since the saloon was practically empty. These dealers, Partle and Brandon noticed, were suddenly alert. All were armed with six-shooters; the faro lookout was holding an ugly-looking shotgun over his knees. Roane realized this Coulter saloon and gambling place could be a tough place. He himself was not armed; he never went armed into a town. He went armed in wildernesses where he might run into a grizzly on the rampage.

Andy Partle wore an old Bisley model six-shooter stuck behind his belt. Andy moved now so that he faced both the dealers and Coulter, with his hand just above the handmade cedar handles of the gun. "I wouldn't start anything, Coulter," said Andy. "I'm old, but I can still plug a dollar in the belly at thirty paces. My friend's got no gun, but he don't need one. That young'un without a shootin' iron is more dangerous than you are with one, Coulter. With his bare hands he could tear you apart, you and any two men you got in here. And what he can't tear apart, I'll shore shoot apart."

For a moment Coulter stared at Andy Partle's Bisley, then he looked at Roane Brandon in his garb that was reminiscent of the old fur trapper days. Meanwhile the dealers in the place looked at their employer for some signal. Abruptly Coulter shrugged his shoulders.

"If you want to go in and buy horses off the Cross Seven, all right," he stated. "It's no funeral of mine." Turning, he strolled back into his office.

Coulter had backed down, but when Partle and Brandon left, they kept a

wary eye on the Coulter dealers. Outside, the pair looked at the little town, built on a slope of the monster canyon cut by the Night River. Upstream, in an enormous bend of the river, were the seven so-called Canyons of the Night: Dusk, in which the Cross Seven headquarters lay, and four sister canyons comprising the Cross Seven range—Dark, Twilight, Moon and Midnight. Closer, explained Andy Partle, were the two canyons, Dawn and Star, in which were the ranches of the Garys, the Neils and the McWhirters.

"Nothin' to keep us from travelin' into them canyons now—'ceptin' our good sense," remarked Andy, and the two headed for their camp.

A big flop-eared hound came out to greet Roane, leaping up on him and giving one deep bark. Roane patted the black and tan hide of the animal, called Savvy because he was a smart dog with lots of savvy.

Bringing in their hobbled horses, they packed up and prepared to travel, although the sun was already swinging low over the rims.

"I don't like this trip," Andy Partle grumbled as he tightened a pack saddle cinch. "That gambler wasn't tellin' us no fairy story about how dangerous it is down there with a war on between the Cross Seven outfit and their neighbors in Dawn and Star Canyons. They's allus a lot o' tough cowboys ridin' them canyons. Nobody would ever work that rough country 'ceptin' outlaws on the dodge."

"Is that why you took a job there?" asked Roane slyly.

"Yes, it was," the other man admitted frankly. "I had to go on the dodge for a few years until the trouble I was in cleared up. Best horses I ever seen down there, but them canyons is just good places for funerals. A thousand feet straight down in some places. Them canyons had me spooked then and they still got me spooked. I'm tellin' you I got a feelin' we'll never get back out of there."

Roane Brandon chuckled. "You ought to get yourself a gypsy outfit and tell fortunes for a dollar a throw. Better buy yourself a quart of liquid courage before you leave town."

"It'd take a bar'l to help me," Andy said whimsically, as he slapped the saddle on his horse. "The kind o' shivers I got now would take more'n whiskey to warm up. Nossir, I didn't like this from the time that Nab woman sent me a thousand dollars cash to hand Fred Temple as down money in a deal to buy horses. I couldn't see no sense to handin' out a thousand dollars for nothin'. What was to keep me from just waltzin' in, I thought.

"But that woman was right. She wrote that any other way it wouldn't be safe. Strangers found in them Night Canyons are shot on sight, with gunhands jist hired to exterminate Garys and Neils. I cain't believe it—when I worked on the ranch, Addison Stevens was plumb friendly with the Garys. But he's dead now, and this here Temple is in charge. A different breed."

Andy's jaw suddenly fell and he stopped his work. "Now I know that fattish feller that sat at the table!" he exclaimed. "Hamlin Stevens, Addison's half-brother. He used to be a slim sort. Owned some stock in the ranch, and used to come there to live and hunt in between traveling to Europe and back. Drinkin'est feller I ever heard of. Two quarts a day was nothin' to him when he was goin' good. But he was quiet on his drunks—not no hell raiser."

"Not like you then," remarked Roane jokingly. "Come on, get that horse loaded. You can chatter later."

They set out, jogging along with jouncing pack boxes and with the hound Savvy sniffing at trails but following none, knowing this was not a day to hunt. But after the hound had scared two young grouse whirring into a pine, Roane shot them. Grouse would make a good supper.

Reaching the rim of a deep canyon, Andy halted. "Moon Canyon," he said. "Next one to it is Dusk, where the Cross Seven headquarters is located.

Might as well camp here; it's gittin' late. I used to stop here often, years ago when I was ridin' for the Cross Seven."

Roane hobbled their horses while Andy cooked supper. The return to the country where he had ridden years before had put the oldish Partie in a sentimental and reminiscent mood.

"It's sorta like one of these romances you read about in books," confessed Andy as they ate. "This here Margaret McNab woman—we called her Nab—she looks rough as an alligator, but underneath she's got a soft heart and a big one. She was on the ranch as nurse to that motherless little girl Linda Stevens, when I was ridin' there. That little girl couldn't 'a had a better mother. That Nab was a mighty fine nurse too—she saved my life one time I had pneumonia. That's when I fell for her—hard."

"Why didn't you marry her?" demanded Roane.

"I'd of done it in a second. The only reason why I didn't is Nab wouldn't have me then. Said she was going to stick to this little girl, Linda Stevens—that Linda bein' without a mother needed her more'n I did. So when I left the ranch I told her, 'Nab, if you ever need a wuthless roughneck to perform some triflin' service, let me know.' And she promised me she would, but I never heard nothing more all these years until I got that letter from her.

"She said the Stevens girl had been sent back East to school a few years back and Nab had gone to the Coast to nurse in some hospital. Now she was back on the ranch again, sort of as companion for Linda Stevens, who was all grown up. She said that Linda's pa had been killed in a gunfight, and if I was still willin' to give that help I offered once, to let her know, but that it might mean a risk to my life. So I wrote her back I'd come, and that's when she sent the thousand cash so I c'd get on the Cross Seven disguised as a horse buyer. That's all right, but I hadn't no call to get you into it."

"You didn't get me into it," disagreed Roane. "I begged for the chance to come along. And anyway I owe you something. I haven't forgotten how you took me in after Dad died."

Andy spat tobacco juice. "You don't owe me nothin' for that. You could of raised yourself from the time you was a five-year-old weaner, livin' by huntin' and trappin'. Nobody had to take you in."

JEAN CARVEL

"All right," said Roane good-humoredly. "There's no debt on either side. And I just came along for a chance to look at these Night River horses and see some new country. And to see this Nab lady fall into your arms."

Savvy, busy with part of a grouse carcass, suddenly began a low growling. Andy scolded the hound.

"Let him growl," said Roane. "Savvy's hearing something and warning us against it. And by his growl it's no coyote smelling our grub. It's something more serious. Savvy smells a man."

"'Cordin' to you that hound kin talk," Andy hoorawed his partner. "That brute'll get you into trouble some day. He'll tackle a bear and then run back to git behind you for protection."

"Not Savvy," returned Roane. "I'm going to douse the fire and when I do,

you jump back into the brush. And don't waste any time jumpin'. That's a man Savvy's smellin' back there."

Leaning forward, he swiftly spilled a canvas bucket of water over the small flame. As steam and smoke arose, he and Andy leaped back into the darkness. Seconds later came the crash of a rifle sounding from the direction of a rocky point behind camp. A second shot came a moment later. Roane, grabbing a rifle from his bedroll, shouted to Savvy, "Go git him, boy!" When the hound, with a deep bark, streaked toward the little rocky hill, Roane was close at the dog's heels.

There were no other shots, but as the hound's voice lifted again in a booming bark, up ahead came the quick drum of horse hoofs and the crash of a horse through the brush. Savvy pursued hotly, as the fleeing rider kept to the dense cover of pinion and cedar, racing away from the camp. Roane realized the man would put a bullet into the hound if Savvy got too close and, taking a whistle from a pocket, he sent a shrill blast to recall the dog from his hopeless chase.

Before he returned to camp, Roane found the boot tracks of the ambusher, not many yards from the camp. Using several matches he photographed their shape in his mind and took measurements with a piece of string.

Andy had built up the fire again and was stomping about angrily when Roane returned. "The blasted killer," he growled. "All set to take a potshot at us. Likely sneakin' up to git close range shots at us when you put out that fire. Lucky that hound smelled him out."

"Yeah," agreed Roane, searching about in his bedroll and bringing out a pair of Indian moccasins which he began exchanging for his high-heeled riding boots. "That bird came from the direction of Hurley. He was sent out likely by someone there. I'd mention your old friend Coulter if it wouldn't hurt your feelings."

"I'd like to hurt Coulter with a hot sixgun slug," grunted Andy, "if 'twas him that sent that buzzard after us. You sure ain't goin' chasin' a feller at night in this country afoot," he protested, watching Roane put on the moccasins. "It's goin' to storm and in the dark there's cliffs where if you fell off you'd land about in time for breakfast —only it'd be some buzzard's breakfast, not yours."

Roane swiftly laced the moccasins. "I got a pair of night eyes and I'll take Savvy along on a leash to guide me. I've got to go afoot. If I rode a horse that fellow would hear me coming a mile away."

"Goin' afoot after a man on a horse!" exclaimed Andy, and then abruptly shut up. He knew that Roane was a buckaroo who had ridden bad outlaw horses, and as a mountain cowboy had roped bulls on treacherous slopes. Andy also knew that in hunting, Roane and his pack of hounds had run innumerable bear and lion in country too rough to ride a horse over, and had done it for hours at a stretch. Roane could travel all day at a trot; most lion and bear hunters can. They usually have to, in following their hounds on a hot trail.

Standing by the campfire in his buckskin jacket, Roane looked like an Indian, except that his features were too square and his eyes were blue. He put a knife in a scabbard at his waist, wrapped a little bread, jerky and coffee into a package, and dropped a dozen rifle cartridges into a pocket. "I feel like taking a little run," he remarked. "If I don't come back tonight, you move the outfit on tomorrow to the Cross Seven headquarters. I'll join you there."

"If Savvy was a little bigger you could put a saddle on his back and ride him," said Andy. "But I hate to see you go, Roane. It's risky, following a bushwhacker like that in rough country. He may lay for you or he may travel fifty miles 'fore he stops."

Roane shrugged and picked up the carbine. "I won't kick at going fifty miles after that hombre. I aim to find

out who would sneak up on us to ambush us. Want to ask him why he did it."

"Better put a bullet in him first and ask him later," cautioned Andy Partle. "They play marbles for keeps in this Night River country, and they use lead slugs for marbles."

## CHAPTER III

### *Two Good Samaritans*

SAVVY had no trouble in picking up the trail of the horse of the would-be dry gulcher. The rider had headed down into Moon Canyon on the trail Roane and Andy had followed from town. Savvy trotted down it, sniffing occasionally, tugging on his leash but not very hard, whining a little in a bored way. Savvy wasn't too keen to be on this trail. There was nothing exciting about following a tame horse. It was just a job. Chasing a rabbit would have been more fun and sport.

The canyon bottom was wide, fairly level and clear of trees. Off under the peaks a storm was brewing, but here the moon was out to show a wagon road. The rider was following this road and after him trotted Savvy, mile after mile, with Roane jogging along tirelessly in his moccasins.

Out of this canyon the road angled finally to climb through a long pass in a ridge. Then crossing a wide mesa, it dropped into another canyon. From Andy's description, Roane knew that this would be Dusk Canyon, in which lay the Cross Seven headquarters.

He rested a minute or so, listening to the night noise of the wind through the pines on the slopes, lulled by it as if by music from a great organ. Then again man and dog went on. The road forked, one branch climbing into a side canyon. The horse tracks were plain in the moonlight, turning up the side canyon. Roane turned with them. Several times he thought he could catch the sound of a horse's steel shoes up ahead. It did not surprise Roane that he should be overtaking the horseman. Ordinarily men did not ride fast at night in canyon country—a jog at best—and Roane had trotted almost steadily since he had left Andy. He increased his pace a little. Clouds were beginning to drift across the moon and stars, and the road angled back and forth along a dark wooded slope.

Roane was a hundred yards or more from what he judged was the canyon rim when he heard the crash of a gun, a six-shooter, above him. Two or three seconds and there was another shot; then a third. Roane halted, listening hard. Whoever was doing the shooting was certainly not firing at him. After a little period of silence came the sound of a horse running away, tearing through brush with a clatter of flopping empty stirrups. Plainly the horse was riderless.

Savvy growled but Roane silenced him. Another horse was in motion now, going across the mesa with the regular hoofbeats of a lope. Roane began climbing again, following the road at a trot, with Savvy padding ahead of him. The moon was blanketed by clouds; a few stars gave a little light.

The most plausible explanation for the shots was that the man he and Savvy had been trailing had met another rider, and there had been a short fight between the two. One man had been knocked from his saddle and his horse had run off without him. The other, not waiting to make sure whether he had killed his man or not, had loped away.

On the rim, Roane hesitated for a moment. From the thick darkness of a clump of cedars and pinions came the sound of a human voice, raised in what seemed a faint call for help. He moved toward it warily, for as Andy had said, this was dangerous country. Savvy growled a little; he stopped to tie the dog to a tree.

After that he catfooted along, carbine in his hand, moccasins pressing

down softly until he was certain there were no sticks to crack under them. There was no further call, but he heard several groans. Someone had been shot, but an injured man if still alive can be as dangerous to someone wanting to help him as to an enemy.

Pushing aside a growth of small pines, Roane looked out on a little open space. The light was just sufficient to show the dark blot of a man lying on his back. Roane moved in quietly to kneel by the fellow's side, first making sure that the fellow had no gun. The wounded man's hands were empty and drawn up under his right shoulder.

Roane struck a match, cupped it. The man was a long, sandy-haired cowboy somewhere in his early twenties. His eyes were closed. Another match in a swift examination showed that his pair of high-heeled boots were much smaller than those worn by the man who had ambushed Roane and Andy. This cowboy was a victim of that ambusher, which warmed Roane to him at once.

Building a little fire out of dry twigs, he took away the clenched hands and found blood soaking the flannel shirt just below the shoulder. Cutting away part of the shirt revealed a hole made by a bullet which had smashed through the man's right side high up, leaving a gaping wound from which blood flowed freely. To staunch the flow Roane divided his neckerchief to make two wads, fastening them with strips of cloth torn from the man's shirt. Hearing the murmur of a creek not far away, he brought a hat full of water to pour some down the throat of the man, who had begun to whisper faintly, "Water!"—still without opening his eyes.

There was not much help Roane could give. A doctor was needed here.

They were, Roane knew, somewhere on the big mesa above the Cross Seven headquarters, in Dusk Canyon. He could go down the trail and along the canyon bottom until he came to the ranch, but that would be a long time to leave the young fellow; maybe too long.

In cutting away the blood-soaked shirt, he'd heard paper crinkle in a pocket. Examining the paper now, he found it was a letter addressed to one Tom Gary. If this were one of the Garys, deadly enemies of the Cross Seven, that did away with his idea of going to the Cross Seven for help. There would be no help there for a Gary.

Looking about him, he suddenly saw a faint glimmer of light through the pines to the north. Climbing a little hill, he could see the mounting flames of a fire; a fire started recently, since he had not seen it before. It offered a prospect of help, and he started off on a trot.

Near the campfire which was burning low by the time he came near it, he saw the gray tarp of a covered wagon. He raised a hail. It was not answered, but as he went close to the wagon, a voice sounded from behind him—a feminine voice.

"Drop that rifle," the voice ordered him firmly. "Then put up your hands and march toward that fire and don't try any tricks."

"Yes ma'am; no ma'am," he said meekly, and letting his carbine fall, went along with his hands up. He grinned a little. He liked that voice despite the attempt of its owner to make it sound very harsh and forceful.

Reaching the fire he calmly used a moccasined foot to kick up the fire, then turned to look at his captor. She was a girl of sixteen at most, he judged, garbed in a blue skirt, leather jacket, high-heeled boots. Her hair, brown with luminous lights caught from the fire, was fluffed above a dark-eyed face that was the prettiest Roane had ever seen. A mighty cute kid, despite the double-barreled shotgun she held in a business-like manner.

"Sorry to disturb you, Miss," he said, "but I ran onto a man who's been shot and is in a bad way. He's lying close to the place where this road drops through the rimrock. I'd like to bring him here to be taken care of. Laying

out in the open, he won't have much chance to pull through."

"I heard the shots," said the girl. "That's why I built up the fire. I was figuring to go over and investigate. But you found him, you say? Is he—" She hesitated. "I'm worried about my father. He rode off today and hasn't come back yet. That isn't the direction he went, but—" Her voice broke off.

"It can't be your father," Roane assured her hastily. "A young fellow. One of the Garys; at any rate he carried a letter in his pocket addressed to Tom Gary. I'm a stranger in this country, but the man that shot him, I'm positive is the same hombre that fired at my partner and me in our camp above Moon Canyon tonight."

The shotgun lowered a little then only to be brought sharply up again. "How do I know you're telling the truth?" she demanded.

"Why would I tell you anything else?" he returned simply. "The only way I can prove it is to show you that young fellow. Right now you'll just have to take my word that I'm not a liar."

"I know you're not lying," said the girl quickly, and as if to show she was ashamed of having doubted him she at once leaned the gun against a wagon wheel. "Can you bring him here on a horse?"

"Only way to get him here, I guess, although I hate to run the risk of all that jolting. If there was another man, we could carry him on a stretcher. Are you alone here?"

She nodded. "Yes. We're strangers in here too. We were traveling to see the Garys about some horses that strayed back to this country and we came to a stretch of road that we couldn't get the wagon across. Dad said he'd ride on alone and leave me in camp. He'd have taken me along, but it's dangerous riding through this country and he intended to be gone only a day. But why don't we make a stretcher for this man? I can carry my end of it."

Roane looked at her wiry body. "I guess you could," he admitted. "This young Gary is tall but not so heavy. I'll cut a couple of poles if you'll get a piece of tarp."

By the fire they worked, fastening a strip of stout canvas to two tough poles Roane had cut. Then with Roane carrying the makeshift stretcher and a canteen of water, they started out, walking fast over the rough ground.

He had left Savvy tied near the wounded man and the hound gave a deep bark as they came near. Surprisingly, Roane found young Gary conscious and even able to talk a little. He stared up at Roane and asked, "Who are you?"

"Someone that's willing to help you, Mister. My name is Roane Brandon. I ranch over in the Cradle River country. And this girl's father rode to see you Garys about some stray horses. He hasn't come back yet; maybe you met him. He bought some horses from some of your family some time ago."

"His name is Dan Carvel," put in the girl. "You haven't seen him?"

"No," said the wounded man. "But I left the ranch early today. Your horses came back; my brother Ed said they were the ones he'd sold."

Roane held the canteen to Gary's lips, and Gary swallowed a little.

"You know what man you met up here?" asked Roane. "The fellow that shot you?"

In the Second March Number

The Road to Grayhorse

*The Story of a Lost Range Empire*

By FRANK C. ROBERTSON

Gary hesitated a moment, then shook his head.

"Wouldn't tell us, I reckon, if you did," said Roane. "Want to look after your own wolf skinning. We'll have to get a doctor for you. Nearest one I suppose is in Hurley."

"No, none there. My uncle, Will Gary, is a doctor, the best in Night River country. Lives over on a ranch near Dad's in Dawn Canyon. I'll be able to ride back in a couple hours, if I can get a horse. I wish you'd get word to—to—" Another gusty sigh came, then, weak from the strain of talking, he fainted. The blood flow from the wound had dwindled, but plainly a ride, even a short one, would start it again.

They placed Gary on the stretcher and started out, walking slowly so as to jar him as little as possible. Thunder was rumbling from a cloud bank to the northwest. Roane led the way, enabled by his freakish eyes to avoid brush and boulders despite the darkness made by the approaching storm. The girl tired but she was game, refusing to stop longer than a few seconds to rest.

Reaching the camp, they placed Gary in a comfortable bed Jean Carvel made in the wagon for him. There Roane undressed the man. Meanwhile the girl had prepared bandages and together they washed the dirt from about the ugly wound as best they could without disturbing the blood clots. The bleeding had practically stopped but a high fever had begun to burn the man's body. In delirium he began to mumble a few words. Jean Carvel glanced up at Roane in astonishment.

"Why, he's saying the name of that girl from the Cross Seven, the one who saved Dad from being quirted by those brutes yesterday: Linda Stevens. He wants word gotten to her. But I thought the Stevens and Gary families are enemies."

"They are," said Roane. "I heard in town that Addison Stevens was found with a Gary and a neighbor, all dead of bullets. This cowboy may be a friend of the Stevens girl, but I've got a hunch he has to be kept hidden from the Cross Seven bunch; that his life won't be worth much if they find him."

"We could take him on in the wagon, toward the Garys, if the road wasn't washed out."

"But you wouldn't be here if it hadn't been washed out. I don't know what to do with him. It's going to rain, which will wipe out our tracks carrying him over here. But I doubt if it's safe to leave him in the wagon. Likely a Cross Seven rider shot him, and that fellow may ride up here in the morning to see what happened to the man he potted."

She nodded agreement. "The wagon is off the road, but it can be easily seen, and if anybody comes into camp, they could hear Gary moaning. But what can we do?"

"I can borrow a horse from you to ride for his doctor uncle to attend to him. Maybe he'll say it's safe to move him home. Meanwhile he can be hidden in that rocky ridge back of here, with a shelter rigged up against the rain. But I don't like to leave you here alone in this ornery country. You better ride with me to the Garys. Your dad is likely there by now."

"Go away and leave Gary by himself?" Jean Carvel shook her head. "I couldn't do that. And Dad might come back here and find me gone. Not that I wouldn't like to be out of here. I've been scared ever since I came down into these deep canyons, and I'll stay scared until we get out. If Dad doesn't come back and he isn't at the Garys, I'll have to hunt for him tomorrow."

A few drops of rain hissed into the fire. Roane looked at his watch. It was still an hour before midnight. By morning enough rain would have fallen to cover the tracks they had made carrying Gary to camp.

Taking a lantern and axe, he set off into the low rocky ridge. A hundred yards away he found a semi-cave made by a huge boulder that had fallen against a cliff. No horseman could

reach the spot without dismounting; no man afoot could see it without a close search. A few poles and a tarpaulin would make a snug shelter against wind and rain. After he had the shelter prepared, he brought up Dan Carvel's bedroll and a jug of water. Placing the blankets on a bed made of pine needles, he stretched the tarp for a door.

After that he and Jean Carvel put Gary on a stretcher again and transferred him to the shelter. She was to stay with the wounded man during the night. She could, as Roane pointed out, go to and from the wagon along a rocky path without leaving tracks—although the rain, now slogging down steadily, would take care of that.

Back in the camp Roane saddled one of the camp horses, lengthening the stirrups on Jean's saddle. The wagon road leading to the Gary ranches in Dawn Canyon would be difficult to follow in the rain, but he was used to traveling strange country at night.

"I think Tom Gary is in love with Linda Stevens," Jean said, as they drank coffee from a fresh pot she had prepared. "He keeps saying her name. If it came to the worst, she'd help him."

"Maybe she's not in love with him," said Roane. "And she might turn him over to her relatives instead."

"No," said Jean Carvel firmly, "she's not that kind. I saw her. She seemed to be so unhappy herself that she'd hate to make anyone else unhappy. She's sick—I don't mean with a disease. Just sick inside. Unhappy. And I think that she's unhappy because she and this Gary are in love and their families are fighting."

Roane grinned. "Just like a girl to think that," he remarked. "You've been reading a lot of romances. No use to fill your mind with that stuff now. Time for that later."

"Yes?" she scoffed. "How old do you think I am, anyway?"

He looked at her suddenly and frowned. "Older I guess than I thought at first," he admitted. "But I don't imagine you're married, are you?"

"No," she said and chuckled. "Of course not. Not for a long time yet."

"Fine," he said and laughed also. "I'm in no hurry to get married myself. Always figured thirty would be about the right age for me, if I could find a girl to have me by then. Maybe you'd consider waiting that long."

"I thought I'd wait until I was at least thirty-five," she told him.

"Better yet!" he said approvingly. "That would let me put off marrying until I'm about forty. It's a deal: When you're thirty-five I'll be waiting." Then he sobered abruptly. "I hate to leave you here. You won't get scared? I'll be back as soon as I can. I'd leave my dog Savvy, but if anyone saw him here, it would be a dead give-away that I'd been in your camp. I think I'll send him back to my partner with a note for him to move on to the Cross Seven, that I won't be back. I've trained Savvy to go back to the last camp."

"A smart dog. Takes after his owner, no doubt," Jean added slyly. "I'll get you some paper to write that note on, and some oil cloth to wrap it in so it will stay dry."

Drinking his coffee, Roane Brandon looked with appreciative eyes at the girl as she climbed briskly into the wagon. A lot of chance any man would have to marry that girl if he waited, he reflected. She'd have dozens of chances to marry. The only way to get her would be to sweep her off her feet and rush her to a preacher quick.

## CHAPTER IV

### *Death at the Wagon*

THE storm as it moved over the canyons brought with it frequent flashes of lightning. Aided by them, Roane traveled steadily along the road to the Gary ranches, across a rolling pine-covered mesa to drop into another of the seven sister canyons of the Night River. Climbing out of this, the road

wound along a narrow ridge where the cliffs fell almost sheer on one side to descend into a deep gorge that he judged belonged to Dawn Canyon, home of the Garys and neighbor ranchers. Andy had mentioned a narrow precipitous-walled rock gorge called Gary Gorge.

By then the storm had rumbled away, leaving wispy clouds which allowed enough light for travel at a lope, the clattering of the horse raising an uproar that filled the canyon.

Ahead finally he saw the first sign of habitation, a light. Closer he could make out the dim outlines of building and corrals, huddled on a bench a little back from the steep-walled trench through which he rode. This must be a ranch of one of the Gary families; and if the Garys were as quick to shoot as the Cross Seven riders, it might be a ticklish matter to ride up to the place.

Roane found, however, that riding up to the ranch was not simple. He was halted suddenly by an obstruction, a ten-foot fence of poles and wire, stretched between the cliff walls. There was no gate that he could discover. Half a dozen dogs had started a furious barking above him. He raised his voice in a hail that was drowned out by the animals. After repeated shouts he was answered by a mellow, "Hello," which floated from some point below the house.

"You Garys!" he shouted. "I want to come up and talk to you. I've got word for you."

"Come up, but come alone," came the reply. "You can get through on the left. We'll open up for you."

The dogs were called off, and a small section of the fence next to the cliff lifted, leaving a space wide enough for a horse and rider to pass through. Some mechanical device, Roane guessed, operated by a rope or wire from a distance. After he had ridden through, the gate dropped again with an ominous clatter. He was still in a rocky trough, some thirty feet deep.

"What do you want and who are you?" demanded the mellow voice coming from the top of the cliff.

"I've brought news of a young fellow named Tom Gary, and I've come to ask about a man named Carvel. Myself, I'm a stranger here—Roane Brandon. I came to this country to buy horses."

"All right. Leave your horse and walk on up to the house. You'll find a foot trail a little to your left."

He found it, a series of steep steps and, dismounting, climbed to it, to follow a path toward the lighted house. As he approached the building, a door opened and a man appeared and invited him to enter. Inside he found himself in a comfortable, well furnished ranch house. The rancher was a tall, oldish fellow, long-faced, with a bushy mustache the shade of bright wheat straw, and mild blue eyes.

Two men had followed Roane up the path and now came into the house. They were young fellows, resembling Tom Gary; either his younger brothers or cousins, Roane guessed.

"You have news of Tom, you said," remarked the older man.

"Yes. He met some rider tonight on the rim of Dusk Canyon not far from the Cross Seven; got shot," Roane said briefly. "I heard the shooting and found him lying there with a hole drilled in him—just below his shoulder. We put him in a shelter off the road and looked after him as well as we could."

The older man shook his head. "Shot, is he? I'm his father—Clayton Gary. These are his brothers, Ed and Lee. The four of us batch here together. Where did you say he was?"

Roane detailed the location more fully and explained how he had found the wounded man and with the help of Jean Carvel got him to shelter. And he told also that Dan Carvel had headed the previous day for the Gary ranch to hunt for his stray horses.

"Carvel never arrived," said Clayton Gary. "I'm afraid that what happened to Tom may have happened to him. Those Cross Seven gunmen that Temple and Threllen have hired shoot on

sight anyone not belonging to their outfit. But I can't understand what Tom was doing over on the Cross Seven tonight. He knew how dangerous it was to travel over there. But come in the kitchen; we'll have some coffee. Ed, you ride up and bring down your uncle. He's my brother and a doctor," he explained to Roane.

In the kitchen Lee Gary made fresh coffee, warmed meat and biscuits. Roane ate, and told of the deal to buy horses from Fred Temple, omitting, however, any mention that the thousand dollars earnest money had been furnished by Margaret McNab living at the Cross Seven.

"I can't understand what got into Tom to go over in the Cross Seven neighborhood," Clayton Gary remarked again. "Did he say why he rode over there?"

"He was out of his head," Roane replied evasively. He surmised that Tom Gary had been riding to the Cross Seven to see Linda Stevens, but it was only a guess, and Tom Gary's private business besides.

"What's all this fighting over?" he asked.

Gary's face turned bleak. "God knows, I don't. I can't understand what happened to Addison Stevens who ran the Cross Seven until his health broke and his cousin, Fred Temple, came in. Addison was always friendly and cooperated with us—we Garys, our neighbors the Neils and McWhirters. We were all developing in these Canyons of the Night what we think is the finest strain of Western cow horse—rock and mountain horses. It was Addison's idea to cross Morgans with steeldust strains to develop a cow horse that had a world of bottom and spirit, but wouldn't go crazy when roping like thoroughbreds do."

"I've seen some horses out of this country," stated Roane. "They were good ones."

"We've got hundreds of them, enough to make us all rich, if we'd gather them and break them. All of us got along in here fine until Addison Stevens suffered a breakdown in health and the Cross Seven went downhill. Addison practically owned the ranch, except for a little stock owned by his half-brother, Hamlin. He borrowed money from Jim Coulter, the Hurley saloonman-gambler, and sold an interest in the ranch to his cousin, Fred Temple, who's one of these polo-playing sportsmen that think they know all about horses.

LINDA STEVENS

"Shortly after that Addison Stevens seemed to go plumb out of his head; accused us of wanting to kill him; claimed that some of us had taken pot shots at him. We couldn't make him believe otherwise, and then one day we found Addison with my nephew, Lane Gary, and one of the Neil boys—all three shot dead, evidently in a terrible gunfight. Since then there's been open war between us and the Cross Seven."

Clayton Gary got up and poured himself another cup of coffee. "No telling where it will stop. And Tom shot tonight." He shook his head.

"They've gone crazy, that's what," he went on. "The whole Stevens family. A streak of insanity runs through the whole outfit. Addison's half-brother, Hamlin, has showed it all his life. Always was an excessive drinker; my brother had to treat him after the big

sprees he used to go on. If Hamlin hadn't been born in a wealthy family, he'd have been put in an asylum long ago. Lately Fred Temple and his wife have said that they feared Linda, Addison's daughter, would go insane sometime; that she was already showing signs of it. They've brought out a nurse from the Coast to look after her. I'd say that we're living next to an insane asylum, one that has money to hire gunmen."

"Fred Temple is keeping up the feud?" asked Roane.

"Keeping it up! More than that. He's had his manager, George Threllen, hire a bunch of gun-slingers as riders. Temple is an ambitious sort. I think he wants this whole country and its horses for himself and is trying to drive us out. The Cross Seven claims we've shot five of their men. That's a plain lie."

"Seems to me," remarked Roane, "all this is something for a sheriff to stop."

Gary snorted. "The sheriff! That gambler, Coulter, is strong enough in politics to keep the sheriff on the side of the Cross Seven."

Someone rode up to the house, and Ed, who had gone after his uncle, came in. "Uncle Will is up at the Sam Neils," he reported. "They've ridden to fetch him, but it'll be an hour or two before he gets here."

Roane got to his feet. "I'd better be riding back then, without waiting for you," he told Clayton Gary. "That Carvel girl is alone over there. You can come with your brother. We'll look after Tom until you come. I've told you where to find the wagon."

"I'd send one of the boys with you," offered Gary, "but the fewer of us in that country the better. Brother Will and I will get there as soon as we can. And the boys will make a search from this end for Carvel."

Roane nodded. Back through the fence closing the gorge, he shoved his horse hard. The first gray light of dawn was sifting into the canyons when he climbed finally to the mesa where he had left Jean Carvel. He used the last strength in the horse, spurring hard over the mesa, turning off the road at last to head for the wagon.

He smelled the smoke of the fire before he saw the wagon cover through the trees. Nearer he saw someone across the campfire—not one person, but two. One was the girl, her back against a high wagon wheel, holding a quirt. Back to Roane was a tall puncher, feinting to get in past the whip. The man's laughter came to Roane as he rode, an evil sort that sent a flood of primitive rage into Roane. He rode straight in, yelling, in his savage rage forgetting the carbine in a saddle scabbard the Garys had lent him.

The man, who was a black-bearded rangy giant, swung instantly. Seeing the rider, he dropped a hand to draw the six-shooter from his belt holster. Behind him Jean Carvel flashed in to catch the man's forearm—an act that maybe saved Roane from being dumped from the saddle, as he continued to ride in, possessed with a crazy desire to deal bare-handed with the black-bearded brute.

Roaring with anger, the man—who was the Hake that had held Jean captive at the attack on Dan Carvel—shook off the girl's grip. He was too late, however, to fire the six-shooter. Roane had thrown himself from his saddle, catapulting himself at the stranger as one would bulldog a steer. His hundred eighty pounds hit Hake full tilt, sent the man to the ground with Roane on top.

Hake's six-shooter exploded harmlessly just before it flew from his hand to fall close to the wagon tongue.

For a second both lay still, a little dazed by the fall. Roane was the first to get up, but he had only reached his knees when Hake leaped at him like a cougar, bearing him to the ground again, this time with Roane underneath.

Roane twisted himself away and, rolling out of reach, got to his feet. Hake was up like a rubber ball also, to dive for the fallen six-shooter. Too late Jean Carvel, who had stood petri-

GID COULTER

fied, rushed forward to try to kick it out of his reach. Hake had it and with a wolfish growl swung it about just as Roane, diving some six feet through the air, struck Hake with his shoulder. Hake crashed down but this time he held the gun. He could not use it, however. Roane, clamping Hake's forearm, bent it back until he yelped with pain.

The man held to the weapon like grim death, and Roane lowered his hold to Hake's wrist and gun barrel. Slowly he put pressure on the wrist, while Hake twisted and fought furiously to free his hand. There ensued a grim, silent struggle between the pair for the weapon with the younger, Roane, proving to have the superior strength. Using the leverage of his long arms, he succeeded in turning the barrel toward Hake's side.

"Quit," he ordered, "or you'll shoot yourself."

"Damn you!" the man grunted and again tried savagely to wrench the gun away. The weapon was so fixed that the hammer fired without the trigger being pulled, and the hammer had lifted during the struggle. The gun exploded suddenly, sending a shot tunneling upward into Hake's chest, shattering his heart. The man shuddered and then straightened out to lie inert, every muscle relaxed.

Roane got up, breathing hard, holding the six-shooter, staring down at the dead man. As he stood he swayed a little, and Jean Carvel, thinking he was about to collapse, put her arm about him.

"I'm all right," he told her. "Except that I killed a man. I hoped I never would have to do that."

"He killed himself," disagreed the girl. "I'm witness to that. You asked him to quit but he wouldn't. And that's the man who shot Tom Gary last night. His name is Hake. He works for the Cross Seven.

Roane looked at the man's boots. They would leave tracks about the size of those left by the man who had ambushed him and Andy Partle in camp.

"After shooting Gary last night," the girl went on, "he was afraid to risk finishing him in the dark. He went to the ranch and came back this morning to find out what had become of Gary. While hunting him he came into camp here. He caught me and began kissing me. I broke loose, then he came at me again—"

"I'm not sorry I killed him," interrupted Roane grimly. "It was a plumb pleasure. I'd like to do it over again. Him putting his hands on you. I—" His arm went about the girl. "You're the bravest girl I ever knew, Jean. To think that this—this—but let's forget him. I reached the Garys all right, but your dad hadn't shown up there. Tom's father and his uncle doctor will be here soon, and if there's no word of your father by that time, I'll look for him with the help of my hound. How's Gary been?"

She looked in the direction of the shelter containing the wounded man. "He's worse. A lot worse. I'll have to go back to look after him."

"Supposing I spell you out while you cook a breakfast here. There's something else I've got to do too." He nodded at Hake's body. "Bury him and his saddle and turn his horse loose, hoping it won't go back to the Cross Seven headquarters. The horse is only

a half-broke bronc, and the chances are he'll head for the range where he was foaled. If he goes back to the ranch they might backtrack him here, unless the rain starts again. Which it's going to do—those clouds mean business. I hate to bury a man without benefit of coroner and preacher, but it's the only way to make Gary safe, and ourselves."

She nooded. "Go ahead. I can testify later how he ended. We'll never get out of here ourselves unless we're as hard as men like Hake." She brought two shovels from the wagon. "I'll help you," she added practically.

"No," he vetoed that. "You've seen too much already for a girl. You get busy on breakfast."

In an hour Roane had a grave dug and filled and hidden under the pine needles. Rain had started to fall again, a slashing downpour. He had looked in on Tom Gary every few minutes. The boy was in a bad way; no doubt about it.

He ate a hurried breakfast with Jean. They had just finished when someone called from the brush not far from the wagon. Back in the trees, Roane found Clayton Gary and his doctor brother, Will. Roane took them at once to the shelter where the doctor made a careful examination of his nephew.

## CHAPTER V

### *Fugitive Hunt*

THE doctor-rancher, Will Gary, took his nephew's pulse and temperature; shook his head. "Tom can't be moved far," he declared flatly. "I can clean out that wound and give him enough opiate to put him to sleep, but he'd never live halfway to Dawn Canyon if we tried to move him now by horseback. The jarring would reopen that hole and he'd bleed to death. The best we could do is to take him over part way by stretcher and the rest of the way in a rig at night, but I couldn't recommend even that for a couple of days."

"But if we leave him here," argued Clayton Gary, "he's in danger of being tracked down and shot by these Cross Seven hounds."

"I don't think he'll be tracked down after these rains, stated Roane. "They may not even know anyone was shot last night. The man who shot him, Hake, came back here this morning to hunt for Tom. It's just possible Hake might not have told anyone of the fight. And Hake sure won't tell anyone now." Briefly he told the Garys of his encounter with Hake.

Dr. Gary nodded. "It's at least safer to leave Tom here than to try to move him on a horse. Leaving him in enemy country is bad enough, but it gives him a chance at least; taking him away now means he'd have none."

"If he's got to stay, he'll have to stay," said Clayton Gary resignedly. "I'll be here with him of course. You tell me how to take care of him."

"I'd stay myself if I could," said the doctor. "But with Mrs. Sam Neil expecting a baby, I've got to go back. And I couldn't do Tom much good by staying here. Keep his fever down; give him little to eat—that's all we can do. I'll clean out this wound and we'll hope that he dodges blood poisoning and pneumonia. Then I'll be starting back and plan to get here again tonight to see him."

Hastily Dr. Gary worked with the patient, after which he rode away, taking a little used trail to return to Dawn Canyon.

Jean Carvel, who had stationed herself on a little rocky pinnacle near the wagon to keep watch, hurried to the shelter to give warning that a group of riders, a dozen or so, had come up the road leading from the bottom of Dusk Canyon. Threllen, the Cross Seven manager, was leading them.

This brought a fresh complication. Roane went back with the girl to the pinnacle. Through the rain they saw that all the riders except two were

spreading out through the timber near the head of the side canyon, evidently to make a search. So Hake had told the Cross Seven that he had shot someone and Threllen had brought men to hunt the wounded man.

Two of the party had caught sight of the wagon cover, evidently, for they were coming through the trees toward the Carvel camp. Jean identified one of these as Threllen; the other Roane recognized as Fred Temple.

"Keep cool," Roane told the girl. "There's been enough rain to cover the tracks of Hake's horse to your wagon. Tell them you haven't seen him, but maybe heard a horse off in the brush this morning. And you heard no shots last night."

Roane hid in a dense thicket of brush close to the wagon, judging it best that he be not seen in the Carvel camp. Threllen and Temple pulled up near the wagon to find Jean washing breakfast dishes—only one set.

"Your father, where is he?" demanded Threllen harshly. "I gave him orders to travel straight on to the Garys."

"The road was so bad that we couldn't take the wagon along it," returned the girl spiritedly. "Dad left by horseback yesterday to go to the Garys. He was to come back last night, but he didn't."

Fred Temple, whose pale blue eyes had been admiring Jean Carvel's pretty face and slim person, pushed himself into the talk. "So you're the girl who came in here hunting stray horses?" he said, with a gallant sweep of his hat. "And your father rode to the Garys and hasn't returned? It's easy to guess what's become of him in that case.

"Too easy," he went on, with a show of deep regret. "He ran into some of these Gary killers and they shot him, just as they shot my cousin and five of our riders. My name is Temple; I run the Cross Seven. May I offer you my sympathy and protection? And may I suggest that you come to the Cross Seven to stay with us until we have definite word of your father? Meanwhile I'll do what we can to find your father. I'm afraid however," he added, with a shake of his head, "that I can't offer too much hope."

There seemed but one thing to say to Temple's offer. Jean had to thank the man although she realized what lay behind his pretended solicitude. Temple plainly was a lady-killer. Jean had known a few of his sort.

GEORGE THRELLEN

"We were told that one of the Garys rode over here last night and was shot by one of our men," Temple went on. "There must have been a shooting scrape not far from here—near enough for you to have heard the shots."

"I'm a sound sleeper," the girl said evasively.

"You should have heard the shots," repeated Temple, "if there was any shooting. Maybe there was no shooting at all. Threllen, I think Hake might have been lying. He said he was coming back here early to see if he could find the man he'd shot. He's not here now. You didn't see him, Miss Carvel?"

Jean hesitated. "I did think I heard a horse off in the brush this morning," she said. "But I could have been mistaken."

"Ten to one Hake was spinning us

a wild yarn," Temple said to Threllen. "He claimed he recognized Tom Gary. But what would Tom Gary be doing over here?"

"Someone from the Garys has been close to the ranch house several times in the last couple weeks," stated Threllen. "Twice I followed the tracks of a horse back to Gary Gorge." Fuming, Threllen glanced about the timber and at the rocky rampart in which Tom Gary lay. "I say Hake wasn't lying; he did shoot somebody. But what's become of Hake? All this don't look good to me. If Tom Gary was wounded and set afoot like Hake said, he's likely hiding somewhere around here. I'm going to have this mesa hunted over foot by foot. We'll locate him if it takes us all day." Threllen's voice held a stubborn determination. Jean realized that he meant what he said. Her heart beat fast. Tom Gary and his father were certain to be discovered.

The sky was clearing a little and the rain changing to a drizzle. If Threllen kept his men circling here, combing the country thoroughly, they would be sure to come to the shelter. And that meant a gun battle which would end in both Garys being slaughtered. A desperate chance had to be taken to get them out of that danger.

Jean smiled at Fred Temple. A plan had flashed into her mind.

"I think if you don't mind," she said, "I'll move my wagon near your ranch this morning, Mr. Temple, and camp there until my father has been found."

Fred Temple positively beamed approval of this. "Certainly," he said. "You're welcome to do that. But you don't have to camp. You'll be more than welcome as a guest in our house. My wife will be glad to have you," he added.

He glanced over Jean's head and frowned suddenly. "Why, there's Linda!" he exclaimed. "Followed us up here in this rain. What got into her?"

Jean turned also and saw the girl who had saved her father from a quirting, riding toward the wagon. This morning Linda had discarded her side saddle and riding habit for jeans, a man's shirt, slicker and stock saddle. Jean noticed as the girl pulled up near the wagon that the pale face was tense, drawn, and the eyes were red as if from weeping.

Jean promptly poured a cup of steaming coffee and took it to the girl. Linda Stevens took it with a trembling hand. Fred Temple and Threllen had withdrawn a little distance to talk, which gave Jean her chance. She signalled to the girl to move her horse a few paces so that both she and Linda would be only a few feet from Roane Brandon's hiding place—so close that he could overhear their talk.

"You know Tom Gary?" Jean asked directly.

The girl stared at her in wide-eyed surprise. "I know him, yes," she admitted hesitantly. "I knew him years ago. He and his brothers came to our ranch to attend school."

"You don't hate him? "

The girl's fingers tightened on the handle of the cup. "No, I don't hate him," she said huskily. "But how do you know about Tom? You have seen him? Tell me what happened!"

"You're willing to help him?" persisted Jean.

"Yes, anything. Believe me, I'd do anything for him. I have to listen to Threllen and Temple and the rest talk of murdering the Garys, but I love Tom. He's been coming to the ranch secretly to see me, although each trip has meant risking his life. He was to come last night, but he didn't. Something happened to him. At the ranch this morning I heard that Hake claimed to have shot one of the Garys —Tom, he thought. Tell me, what happened?"

"Hake did shoot Tom Gary. Shot him from his saddle, but he's still alive. We've been taking care of him. He's not far away from here now. Too close

to be safe. Threllen is hunting this mesa, and he'll be found, sure. There's no time to lose. He needs your help."

The soul of the girl was revealed in the sudden illumination that came to her face. "I'll do anything," she repeated. "What can I do? Tell me!"

Jean's voice became matter-of-fact, casual. "You've got to calm yourself first. I'm going to hitch up the team to the wagon and move down canyon to be near your ranch. I want you to ride into the rocks where you see those two dead pines leaning against each other. A few yards west of there you'll find Tom Gary and his father. You must tell his father it's necessary to move his son at once and the only way to do that is to get him to the wagon. There's a stretcher in the shelter that can be used to bring him here. Once here we can hide him in the back. I'll drive close to the Cross Seven headquarters. Tom can stand only a short trip, otherwise I'd take him to Hurley. Do you understand?"

Linda Stevens nodded. "Yes. Bring him to the ranch. We'll find a place to hide him there in the cliffs."

Threllen had ridden away to join his men, but Temple was lingering near the wagon.

"When you come back," Jean went on, "you've got to get Temple away from here without making him suspicious."

After the girl had ridden into the trees, Jean hurried to get the gray team harnessed. Roane Brandon, she knew, would follow Linda Stevens to the shelter and help Gary move his son. Jean found herself working in a frenzy of haste, with her fingers all thumbs. Then she suddenly got hold of herself. A man's life—no, the lives of three men: Roane, Tom and Tom Gary's father—were at stake. With the team hooked to the wagon, she loaded up the camp gear, spreading her bed in the back for Tom Gary.

When she began work, Fred Temple lazily sat his horse nearby, chatting, plainly liking to talk with a pretty young stranger. But when Linda Stevens returned, she soon disposed of Temple, challenging him to hurdle some fallen trees. Temple preferred showing off his riding skill, of which he was plainly proud, even to talking to Jean. Little by little, by inducing Temple to race his horse against hers, Linda got Temple out of sight of the wagon.

Jean stood guard while Roane and Clayton Gary brought the wounded man from the brush to load him into the vehicle. Then Roane went back for the bed and tarpaulin, while Gary crawled in beside his son.

"It will be a hard ride for him," Jean said.

"It's not far to the Cross Seven," said Clayton Gary. "They'll never think to look for Tom there; it was a smart idea you had. We'll get him away as soon as we can, though, if we have to carry him every foot on a stretcher. I'm afraid to trust the Stevens girl with a secret like this. She may mean well toward Tom, but she's got an insane streak in her, same as the rest of the family."

Jean went into the brush to meet Roane who had brought the bedroll. Placed in the back of the wagon, it would serve as a screen for the Garys.

Roane looked at her. "You're a smart, brave girl," he told her warmly. "I'm riding out now, taking Clayton Gary's horse with me to turn loose; it won't do to have him found around here. Then I'm riding to meet my partner. Want to get my hound to help hunt for your father. It's rained too much for a dog to find old trails, but Savvy he's not an ordinary dog. I'd like something your father has worn."

"There's an old soft leather pair of shoes he wears around camp," she said. "I'll get one of them."

"Fine. If he's afoot and wandering about, Savvy can cut his trail in a hurry. I'll see you at the Cross Seven tonight, and I'll hope to have good news for you."

Jean forgot the danger and worry for a moment, looking at Roane Brandon. "You'll be running the risk of being shot yourself," she told him. "All this is shooting country. Be careful."

"*You* be careful," he ordered. "You're taking a lot of chances yourself, doing this for Tom Cary." He grinned. "The more I see of you, the more willing I am to wait for you until I'm forty. But only if I have to," he added.

A little later she sat in the front of the wagon. She spoke to the team and the grays moved out.

## CHAPTER VI

### *Cross Seven Ranch*

THE wagon following the road down the side canyon bumped terribly as its steel-rimmed wheels hammered over stones. Jean flinched with each jar as if she were the wounded man in the back. Behind her Tom Gary occasionally broke out into a delirious mutter which his father tried to quiet.

Reaching Dusk Canyon, they turned down it toward the Cross Seven headquarters. They had traveled a little over a mile along this when a rider galloped up alongside the wagon—Linda Stevens, who had managed to leave Fred Temple behind.

Jean stopped the wagon.

"He's all right?" Linda asked anxiously.

Tom Gary's father was looking over Jean's shoulder at the rider with so forbidding a face that Linda Stevens shivered.

"And what is it to you how he is?" Gary growled.

"She had nothing to do with Tom being shot!" Jean put in sharply, feeling pity for the pale-faced girl.

"There is no blame to her for the shooting," Gary was forced to admit. "But her relatives are responsible. And I promise you, Miss Stevens, we'll get Tom away from the Cross Seven neighborhood tonight, if it's possible."

"There is no need to hurry him away," protested Linda. "You mustn't move him until he's well enough."

Gary's face was stern. "That is for us to judge," he declared. "There is no safety for him near the Cross Seven Ranch, any more than if we were in a nest of—" Evidently he had intended to say "rattlesnakes," but he did not finish.

The wagon rumbled on again, with Linda Stevens riding a little ahead. The canyon was widening now. On the left were slopes covered thickly with pines; on the right rose sheer cliffs. Now the ranch came in sight, lying in the wide cleft made by a side canyon. Below near the creek were the corrals, sheds, stables and a bunkhouse, the latter built of thin slabs of red rock; several hundred yards above sat the ranch house.

It sprawled under a huge wedge of wall, a big rock dwelling built in some respects like an English castle, with little towers and the side walls extended above the roof in a parapet, which was cut with slits designed in the old days for the use of archers. The walls had been built of thin rock laid by expert workmen. Shrubs, trees and stretches of green lawn lay in terraces in front and at the side of the house. It all looked like a pretentious city mansion and was as out of place in this country as a herd of giraffes or zebras.

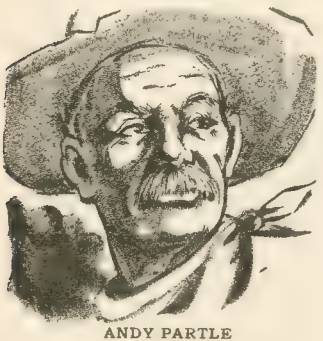
Behind the house lifted cliffs blood-red in color, the kind of red that is somber and gloomy, with a few pinions and junipers that did little to soften the somber walls. In places the cliffs mounted in sheets of solid rock, like curtains hung from the rims to the canyon floor; in other places they had been weathered into towers, obelisks, various-shaped domes and cubes.

Linda Stevens pointed to a break in the cliff a quarter of a mile or so further on and about the same distance from the ranch. "There's a good place

to camp," she remarked. "I played in there as a child. We children had a secret house back under the cliff in a thicket."

Jean stopped the team when they reached the place Linda had pointed out. Clumps of thick brush choked the entrance to the little break in the cliff walls. The wagon could be so drawn up that Tom Gary could be carried from it directly into the brush.

She looked back inquiringly at Gary and when he nodded his approval, she guided the team into the open space, halting the wagon so that the back of it was close to the thicket. Then she got down to follow Gary who had slipped out to enter the brushy covert, through growth so thick that they had to force their way through it. Thirty yards or so and they found the remains of an old play-house. From a low-branched



ANDY PARTLE

tree nearby a tarpaulin could be rigged to make a shelter tent.

While Linda acted as lookout in case anyone should ride up, Gary and Jean got the wounded man back through the brush with difficulty. After that Jean gathered wood and built a fire near the wagon. Linda Stevens would have stayed but she realized that she could be of no help and she was only disturbing Tom's father by being there. Reluctantly she went back to the ranch while Jean made a broth for the wounded man from fresh meat she and her father had brought with them.

Andy Partle came along shortly, leading two pack horses. Roane had met him, he told Jean, and had saddled a horse and ridden out with Savvy to hunt for Dan Carvel. Andy brought Jean's saddle hidden in a bedroll.

"Just leave it to Roane," Andy assured her. "Believe it or not, but Roane's just got a instinct for finding critters. He kin jist size up a country and seem to know where to look for what he's huntin'—b'ar or cougar, or horses or cattle. While that dog Savvy has got the high-poweredest nose I ever seen in a dog. They make a pair, those two. They found a dead man one time after the country had been gone over inch by inch. Of course," he added hastily, "your pa ain't dead. He'll turn up alive."

Jean tried to believe that, but it was hard. If her father had met with an accident, it seemed an impossible task for a man and a dog to find him in a strange country, where rain had certainly washed out all tracks. And yet she had faith in that young fellow who seemed somehow to be part of the canyons, the trees, the mountain peaks. He reminded her of the stories she had heard of the fur trappers, the buckskin clad men who had wandered easily into every corner of the unexplored West, often through hostile Indian tribes. In the strange insane world of the mighty canyons into which she and her father had traveled, where cruelty and murder ruled, Roane Brandon was a stalwart refuge.

The day dragged by. Andy Partle wandered up to the Cross Seven and was gone for several hours. Clayton Gary watched by the side of his son. Jean dozed a little, and came to with a start. The skies were clouded again; rain was falling on distant peaks. Standing not ten feet from her was a man of medium height, rather chunky, with a sharp-featured face and

dark prominent eyes that shone with a malicious delight. He was dressed in slovenly fashion, but carried an expensive hunting rifle.

Jean was frightened. There was something terrifying about the man although he smiled at her. "Have no fear," he said. "It is only Hamlin Stevens, completely and entirely harmless. And you're the little girl whose father has been lost." He made a clucking noise of sympathy, and then smiled again.

This, she realized, must be Linda Stevens' uncle, her father's half-brother. While she looked at him, fearfully, the man suddenly wheeled, galvanized into action. Bringing his rifle to his shoulder he pumped all the shots in the magazine, apparently at a blank spot—the cliff opposite. Then chuckling to himself, he strolled on.

She waited a little and then went back to reassure Gary about the shooting.

"Hamlin Stevens is crazy," he growled. "Raving mad. Oughtn't to be allowed to carry a gun. A no-good that all but drank himself to death when he was young. A wastrel; never did a day's work in his life. Traveled back and forth to Europe until his inheritance was all used up."

The shots had brought Linda Stevens hurrying down to camp afoot. She was shaking with fear, believing that Tom Gary had been found. From the ever-ready coffee-pot, Jean poured a cup of hot liquid for her while she explained the firing.

"Uncle Hamlin should be in an asylum, everyone says," stated Linda. "My father got him out of plenty of scrapes; he's never been responsible. Both my uncle and I would be far better off dead—like Dad," she went on bitterly. "We're no good to the world. But I should keep such talk to myself. You have your own troubles with your father missing," she reproached herself.

"Dad's all right," said Jean, with a confidence she was far from feeling. "Anyway, I'll believe that he's all right until I have word that he isn't. What good is there in worrying until then?"

"None," admitted Linda. "But you have nothing to blame yourself for. With me it's different; my caring for someone resulted in his getting shot. His family hates all of us at the Cross Seven, and I don't blame them. And I can't be of much help to him now when he's in trouble. I couldn't even save his life if they were to find him." Her tone changed. "I want to ask you, Jean, to come up to the ranch for supper tonight—Aunt Erica insists on calling it dinner out here on a ranch. Fred Temple suggested that I ask you. And I want you to meet Nab, my nurse when I was a child. Andy Partle knew her when he worked here years ago. He's been up there talking to her for hours."

Jean hesitated. She did not trust Fred Temple, and the further she kept from him the better. George Threllen was a merciless brute, but she felt safer with him than with Temple. She did not want to go to the ranch, but she could not refuse Linda's invitation.

Linda waited while Jean got ready to go to the house, and together the two girls walked down canyon to head for the grassy terraces below the house. As they passed through a gate in a high, carefully trimmed hedge, they came on a tall, sleek-haired woman cutting flowers from a little garden plot.

"Aunt Erica," said Linda, "this is Jean Carvel."

Erica Temple, a tight-mouthed woman who looked older than her husband, looked at Jean from cold eyes. She nodded slightly, dismissing Jean as of no consequences.

An older woman had appeared—tall, raw-boned. This was Margaret McNab, who had been Linda's childhood nurse. She was a thin, angular woman with hair so colorless and unattractive it could not have been helped by anything except a wig. She bunched it up

carelessly, and let it go at that. She had long bony hands and a voice as rough as a rasp. Despite all this, Jean liked the woman at once: she was plainly so blunt and honest and good-hearted.

The three went into one wing of the big house where a living room and two bedrooms made Linda's suite of rooms. Nab settled down to knitting, making her needles click.

"If you take my advice, both of you," she said in her mannish voice, "you girls will both get out of here. Take two horses and hightail it tonight and keep riding until you are out of the country. It's madness to stay here."

"It's madness," agreed Linda Stevens despondently. "That's just it—madness."

Nab laid down her knitting needles. "Linda thinks," she told Jean, "that she's losing her mind, going insane. She thinks it runs in the family. That's what the Temples say, but I say they're wrong. They claim her pa went crazy and got in a quarrel with the Garys and started all this war. I say it's nonsense. Her uncle Hamlin is sort of crazy, but only from booze. And anyway he's only her father's half-brother."

"Uncle Hamlin says it runs back in the family for generations," said the girl dully. "He says that's why he first started drinking, knowing he couldn't marry with the chance of having his children tainted by insanity. The Temples are right. I feel that I am losing my mind."

"I've got something to tell you, Linda," said Nab. "Those men in here—Andy Partle and that fellow he brought with him—they're here to help you. They're not here to buy horses. I asked Andy to come in here to help you. I sent him a thousand dollars so they could come in here and deal for horses with Fred Temple. And I wouldn't have done that if I thought anything was wrong with your mind, Linda."

"Why Nab!" exclaimed Linda and hugged the woman hard. "You were foolish to use your money for that. And I once even thought you'd turned against me, that you were looking after me because you thought I was going insane!"

"That's how I got the Temples to let me come here," Nab explained to Jean. "They were to pay me a lot of money to testify when a hearing is held to decide if Linda is what they call mentally competent or not. They're the worst people I ever saw, those two; deliberately trying to ruin a young girl's life by getting her declared insane, when it's all nonsense."

Across the court a door was thrown violently open, and Hamlin Stevens emerged in his shirt sleeves, wearing flapping slippers, carrying the hunting rifle. He raised the weapon and emptied it at a canyon wall. Then, reloading in a frenzy of haste, he emptied the gun again.

Linda walked out into the court to take the man's arm and, talking to him soothingly, conducted him back to his quarters.

"Hamlin busts out that crazy way about every so often," said Nab quietly. "But it's only natural after all the whiskey he's downed. As a nurse I've seen a lot of whiskey-swillin' hogs, but never one to compare with him."

A gong summoned them to dinner, and when Linda returned the three went into a hall-like room where a stingy fire burned cheerlessly in a huge fireplace. Fred Temple and his wife appeared, Temple to rush forward to try to take Jean's hands. She dodged him, aware of the glinting eyes of Erica Temple.

They ate in a dining room which wouldn't have been much larger in a real castle, with heavy oak beams and paneled walls of dark wood. It was a dreary sort of meal, with only candles for light, and a bald Chinaman serving. Fred Temple tried to make light talk with compliments to Jean, and his light blue eyes never left her.

Hamlin Stevens came in to take a

place when they were about through. He did not eat; he only stared around the table at everybody from his bugged-out eyes, chuckling to himself occasionally. Linda was the only one who tried to talk to him, but he paid no attention to what she said.

Finally, with a sharp, sarcastic "Excuse me!" he got up quickly and disappeared.

Finished with the meal, the others went back into the hall-like room.

"I'll have to start back," said Jean, wanting desperately to leave.

"Nab and I will walk down to your camp with you," Linda offered.

"Do you think it's safe for you to go out at night, Linda?" asked Erica Temple. "Some of these Gary killers may be lurking around, waiting to kill you as they killed your father."

"I'm not afraid of the Garys, and I don't believe they killed Father," stated Linda, in a sudden flash of spirit. "They're not killers."

Both the Temples gazed at Linda, and in the silence a pin dropped on the tiled-in front of the fireplace would have sounded as loud as a shot.

Then, "You don't know what you are saying!" said Erica Temple, in a sudden rage. "Defending your father's murderers!"

Linda Stevens had shown spirit against Threllen in compelling the release of Dan Carvel, but now the flash of independence died swiftly and she seemed only to cower. "No, I don't know what I'm saying," she admitted tonelessly.

"We will forget what you said," said Erica Temple. "We know you are afraid; that these dark canyons terrify you. You must not forget what happened to your father and you must hate these people who murdered him. They are your enemies," the woman went on, in her hard, smooth voice. "And we must be careful, dear, not to let fear get the best of us. Fear in your case is fatal. You know what it will lead to. You know your weakness. You must guard yourself."

"Yes, Aunt Erica," said the girl meekly.

"As for you, child," Fred Temple said to Jean, "I think you'd better stay here in the house; it's safer. Those horse-buyers—we don't know anything about them, and they are camped not far from you. I think you should stay here at the house, where we can look after you."

"I'd prefer to be in camp," Jean said calmly.

Temple glared at his wife, evidently blaming her for the girl's refusal to stay in the ranch house.

"Tomorrow we'll see what we can do in trying to find your father, my dear," he promised, and took one of her hands. Jean withdrew it, and shivered. More and more she disliked and feared this Temple.

Back at the Carvel wagon, Linda Stevens asked to see Tom Gary, if only for a moment. The wounded man was breathing hard, tossing about restlessly, muttering deliriously. Linda came back to the wagon with tears in her eyes. Nab, as a nurse, went to look at him and make fresh bandages for him. Then the two women returned to the ranch.

Andy Partle wandered down to Jean's camp. Roane had not yet returned from his search, he reported. Jean could see that the oldish man was worried.

## CHAPTER VII

### *Night Boat*

ROANE'S partner was worried. And with good reason, certainly. Roane was in danger of being shot by both sides in the war raging in the canyons off the Night River.

There had been no sign all day of Threllen and the riders that had been making a search on the mesa for Tom Gary. But now the cavalcade of riders

came loping down the canyon, with a sudden outburst of yells, to pull up at the corrals below the ranch house. Lights came on in the bunkhouse.

Andy Partle went in to talk to Clayton Gary, whom Andy had known when he had ridden for the Cross Seven. He came out finally, yawning drowsily, and headed for the camp he had made not far from Jean's wagon.

The lights in the bunkhouse went out and the canyon became quiet. With the storm cleared away the night was still, so still that Jean could hear the occasional restless muttering of Tom Gary. She sat down with her back against a bedroll and dozed a little.

And then, as if he had materialized there by magic, Roane was in camp, smiling at Jean over the fire.

"Found your dad," he reported. "His leg was broken. His horse had been

NAB

shot from ambush, but your father managed to get away—dragged himself into some rocks. Likely some Cross Seven man tried to get him. I got him on a horse and took him to the Garys. Doc Gary set his leg and he's resting easy, except that he's worried about you."

"You found him!" she could only exclaim at first, while relief and gratitude flooded her. "Andy told me you would."

"Thank Savvy," he said, referring to the black-and-tan hound. "He ran on to the fresh trails of three different mountain lions, but I kept him to the notion he was hunting a man. Finding him was luck mostly—and Savvy. I left Savvy at the Garys—he was footsore. You'd better travel over there tonight, and get out of this country."

"But I can't do that," she pointed out. "If I went away, the Cross Seven would be sure to find Tom Gary, unless we could take him with us."

"We can't do that tonight. Doc Gary can't come over tonight; he has to attend a sick neighbor woman. How's Tom been?"

"As well as could be expected. Still out of his head."

"They plan to move him tomorrow night. Doc Gary said it wouldn't be safe any sooner. They're bringing a buckboard tomorrow night to the top of the mesa, and they'll carry him to it by stretcher. You'll leave then too."

"And you?" she asked.

"I'm staying here to get some of those Night Canyon horses. They're the finest I've seen anywhere. The country is full of them."

"Are they worth risking your life for?"

"Sure," he said. "Besides I like this country. I'd like to ranch here in these canyons. Trap beaver in the upper streams, and hunt the mountain lions that are killing off colts. This is horse country if I ever saw one." He was looking at her, smiling a little, his eyes glowing. "I always knew it," he said abruptly.

"Knew what?" she asked, surprised.

"Knew that when I saw a certain face across a campfire, I'd know that face belonged to the girl I'd like to see across my fire always. You fit in with an outdoor fire, Jean."

She laughed at that. "You say the queerest things sometimes, Roane Brandon. Who else would ever tell a girl that she fitted in with an outdoor fire?"

"Sounds foolish, I guess, but it's not.

Looking across a fire at a girl seems the most natural way to me of looking at a girl. My partner tells me I ought to have been born sixty years ago, so I could have been a trapper. But I like living in a house—a good log house. And I can build one too, I'll have you know. I'm going to build one for the girl I marry. As many rooms in it as she wants. And I'm not joking."

"I know you're not, Roane," she said quietly. "And when Dad and I get back to our ranch, you'll come to see us. We've got a big fireplace, and I want to see how you look by the light of it. But that will be when we're all out of these Canyons of the Night—if we ever are."

Roane stepped close to her and put his arm over her shoulders lightly. "Look," he said, "don't you go getting afraid now, after it's all over. Tomorrow night you'll be safe and happy with your father, over in Dawn Canyon."

She was very still a moment. Then, "But you won't be going with us. You'll be staying here."

"And will that make a difference to you?" he asked.

Her eyes met him. "Yes, it will, Roane."

"I like to hear you say that," he told her gravely. His arm tightened about her, drawing her to him. "But I've got to stay here, Jean. Andy and I came in here to help Linda Stevens. Andy's friend—that McNab woman—paid a lot of money so we could come in."

She was silent, her slim figure rigid.

"You persuade Linda to leave with you, and I'll go along," said Roane.

"Is that a promise?" she demanded swiftly.

"It's a promise. It's little to what I'd really do for you, Jean. When you're out of this, I want to tell you just how much I would like to do for you—including that big log house, built to your order."

He thought of her smile as he went to the camp Andy Partle had made and there, near exhaustion from his two trips to the Gary ranch and his long search for Jean's father, he rolled in and slept like a dead man. But he was awake before daylight, joining Andy Partle, who was up getting breakfast. Andy was in a sober mood. To him the situation was as dangerous as a family of children playing with a box of dynamite caps.

Roane agreed, but had he only himself to worry about, he would have been enjoying the danger. These deep canyons, the horses that ranged on the mesas above, the deadly feud even, attracted him. This Cross Seven presented a problem to him like that of catching some renegade shrewd old silvertip, only this situation was one of human minds and human hands that could shoot deadly guns. He had reassured Jean Carvel that the danger was practically over, but he knew it wasn't. For one thing, too many people knew of the presence of the wounded Tom Gary. The girl Linda, in love with the young fellow, might give away the dangerous secret in a dozen ways.

"Only thing to do," said Andy, "is to git all these females and Gary out of here tonight."

"That's a large party to move, without any of these Cross Seven riders finding out about it."

"No matter. Either we all git out or else we're all gone goslin's. That Temple and Threllen are snake bloods from what Nab told me. If they suspected we ain't in here to buy horses, we'd be in hot water quick."

They were eating breakfast when the Cross Seven crew of riders started from the corrals, led by Threllen. Both Roane and Andy put rifles under bedrolls where they could be yanked out quickly and stuck six-shooters under their jackets. Threllen rode up to the fire.

"I heard you brought in a hound. Is he any good at trailing?" demanded Threllen.

"He's got a nose can smell," said Roane. "But not after these rains.

Besides, he's off hunting somewhere now."

"Trouble with that hound, he trails the wrong direction sometimes," put in Andy. "Like he started off wrong way on a turkey trail oncet and finally landed back at the egg shells out o' which they'd been hatched out that spring."

This was a favorite humorous yarn among hunters, but it brought no smile from Threllen.

"One of them Garys was up on that mesa night before last," he said harshly. "And Hake shot him outa the saddle. Hake's disappeared and we haven't been able to find that Gary. It's my idea some people know more about that than they're tellin' and are keepin' their mouths shut. I got a hunch someone hid that man from us, and that might be some of you strangers. One thing," he growled, "you'll get no horses from this ranch. We got none to sell." He rejoined his men and they rode on up the canyon, presumably to take up the hunt again.

Andy and Roane looked after the cavalcade. "That feller gives me a chill," commented old Andy. "Sooner we git outa here the better I'll like it. He suspects us. He may even git around to suspectin' we got Tom Gary hid down here and then there'll be hell to pay in big chunks."

The day passed by slowly. Several times Linda came down with Nab to visit the Carvel camp. They brought news of a heated quarrel between the Temples, ending in Mrs. Temple departing for Hurley in a buckboard driven by one of the ranch hands. The woman often left the ranch after quarreling with her husband, said Nab. Jean suggested that Linda and Nab go to the Garys that night, but the girl replied that she was not wanted by the Garys, and had too much pride to force herself on them. There was no changing her mind.

Roane had ridden out to pretend to look for Carvel again. During the ride he was trailed by several of the Cross Seven riders, and he dared not go to the Gary ranch.

Twice during the day Hamlin Stevens came by with his rifle to send a senseless burst of shots at a bare cliff wall.

In the late afternoon Threllen and the Cross Seven crew returned to the ranch. Roane came in before sunset; Andy Partle told him what news there was. A half-mile up the canyon in a brush clump, Andy had discovered a buckboard that had been abandoned with a broken tongue, evidently shoved off the road and forgotten. Andy had spliced the broken tongue and bound it with rawhide strips to make the rig serviceable. It represented a possible way of taking out Tom Gary if it became necessary. It should not be needed, if the Garys arrived as planned to carry Tom to the top of the mesa where a rig was to be waiting to transport him the rest of the way home.

The sun set, leaving a clear sky. Roane would have preferred a clouded one. There were a lot of men working for the Cross Seven; Andy said he had counted nearly twenty. Just after sunset several more came in from the direction of Hurley. Some more recruits for the Cross Seven army, Andy remarked.

According to the plan, the Garys were due to arrive an hour or so before midnight. Twilight came. Roane regretted that they had not set an earlier hour. He scented danger; there was a lot of restless activity at the Cross Seven corrals.

Down canyon men came from the bunkhouse to go to the corrals to saddle. A dozen men, led by Threllen, raced up canyon to pull in suddenly by the campfire where Andy Partle and Roane were cooking supper. The riders gathered in a semi-circle about the two.

"I told you birds," said Threllen, "that you aren't gettin' any horses from this ranch. So git out—now."

"Now?" said Andy, startled. That meant the end of their plan to take Jean Carvel, Linda Stevens and Nab

out of the country—and to help Tom Gary get back home.

"Now," repeated Threllen harshly. "Git your horses packed and pull your freight."

"How about the thousand dollars we paid as earnest money to Temple?" inquired Roane.

"Talk to him about that," growled Threllen. "We don't want you in this country, that's all."

"Talking to Temple is just what we'll do," said Roane promptly.

"Yeah, we demand to see Fred Temple," said Andy Partle. "We made a deal with him, and he's running this ranch."

"He just thinks he's runnin' it," stated Threllen. "You two are gittin' off the range and doin' it quick. You're not talking to Temple; you're leavin'. We don't want strangers in here. We don't know if you belong to the Gary tribe or not, but some queer things has happened since you come in. One bein' that our man Hake has never showed up and we found his horse runnin' loose without his saddle and bridle."

"But," argued Partle, "we paid a thousand dollars down and we're entitled to take out at least a few head of horses. It wouldn't take a day to get the ten head we paid for."

"No!" said Threllen, raising his voice almost to a shout. "Git your loads on your pack horses and git ready to travel. I'm sendin' some men with you to see that you go to Hurley. They'll take you down the Night River by a short cut."

There was nothing that they could do. They couldn't fight nearly a dozen men who were plainly prepared to go into action at a word from Threllen.

Andy Partle shrugged. "Looks like we got our tickets bought for the train and the conductor is yellin' 'All aboard!' " he remarked.

Silently he and Roane cinched pack saddles on their two horses and loaded them, throwing diamond hitches over topping bedrolls, while Threllen's party watched. Then, satisfied, Threllen turned to go back to the ranch.

"One final thing," he said. "Don't you come back in here, you two, whatever you do."

Roane caught half grins on the faces of several of the men at this remark. He guessed the reason for their amusement.

With four men riding behind them, he and Andy started out, each leading a packed horse. Jean Carvel was waiting by the wagon, and Roane pulled up to talk to her, while Andy arranged his mount and pack horse to keep their escort of four men back out of earshot.

"Don't worry," Roane said, in a low voice. "Threllen told us to pull out, but we won't go far. We'll come back tonight and we'll all get over to the Garys. If we have to, we'll hitch your team to that buckboard Andy fixed and take Gary out in it."

"Those four men with you," she whispered. "I don't like their looks."

"Neither do I," said Roane. "Not well enough for 'em to be behind me. I've got a hunch they're to make sure we don't come back. We'll take care of them."

The moon pushed up as the six jogged on down canyon, heading for the big canyon of the Night River. The four men following grew careless. Roane wasn't sure that they had actually been detailed to kill them, but Threllen, he was convinced, had a great deal more against them than just suspicion.

Andy Partle had no doubts whatever but that their mission had been discovered and the men following them had orders to kill them. The big canyon of the Night River was opening below, and the dull boom of the river came to their ears. The Night would make a good burial place for two strangers; bodies dumped into its sandy current would never appear again. When the trail narrowed so that they would have to ride single file, the men behind could blast Andy

and Roane out of their saddles and roll their bodies into the river.

To Roane this affair had more and more of the certain air of an execution. Executions, however, could backfire. He and Andy still had their six-shooters under their jackets, and Andy Partle was a tough coot who could strike with the speed of a rattler.

FRED TEMPLE

Roane muttered a few words to him as the trail began to narrow, passing into the deep shadow of a cliff wall.

Behind them the four were riding in pairs, smoking, talking. A few yards ahead, huge boulders bordered the trail. Coming to these as the trail curved a little, Roane and Andy swung quickly down, one on each side of the trail. With the move they drew their six-shooters, covering the riders behind them. It was simple because the move had been entirely unexpected.

"Lift your blasted paws!" yelled Andy. "Or we'll blow you to pieces." Roane had scrambled to the top of a boulder from which he could see every move the four made. They were caught flat-footed. One man, who had been carrying his rifle over his saddle horn, hesitated, but only a moment, raising his hands with the rest, letting the weapon fall.

While Roane kept them covered, Andy took their guns, working carefully at their backs, shucking them of rifles and sixguns and searching them afterward for hidden weapons.

"What we doin' with 'em?" inquired Roane.

"Make 'em jump in the river," snapped Andy Partle promptly. "These birds were sent to kill us. We'll just do the same to them."

"We wasn't sent to kill you," whined one of the four. "Just to see that you went to Hurley."

"Don't lie to us!" growled old Andy. "Tell the truth and we'll give you a chance to live. Lie and we'll dump you outa your saddles."

"We're only doin' what we're ordered," said one of the four. "We draw our pay. They got word in Hurley you was spies of the Garys—leastwise that's what Threllen told us."

"And you were to shoot us and throw us in the river?" asked Andy sternly.

"Yeah," admitted the same man. "That was it. There's a big battle coming up in these canyons and we couldn't let no spies be in so close to the ranch. Gid Coulter is bringin' out more men tonight and him and Threllen is startin' a big gun cleanup of this country tomorrow.

"Coulter sent out word about us?" asked Roane.

"Yeah. That you wasn't horse buyers. He telegraphed out about you and found you didn't have ten thousand dollars to buy horses with like you claimed."

"He's a smart bird, that Coulter," admitted Andy. "And now what to do with these buzzards?"

Roane glanced at a log on the river bank, a big cottonwood that had been grounded there by a flood. "That would make a good boat for these birds," he suggested. "We'll take off their boots so they won't walk back and let 'em float down the river."

"Puttin' us into the river on that log!" protested one immediately. "It's plain murder. There's rapids below."

"In that case you can beach the

log before you get to the rapids and head back to the ranch barefoot. It may take you a day or so for the trip, but they won't be needing you there anyway. Meanwhile we want *Señor* Threllen to think that we're floating down the river."

The men had no choice but to obey. Sullenly they took off their boots, and after a great deal of effort managed to roll the log into the river. Then they straddled the log and the sluggish shore current slowly took the strange boat out into the stream.

They rode fast until they neared the Cross Seven again. Lights burned in the bunkhouse, besides the main house. Cautiously they kept to the slope opposite the ranch until they were above the Carvel camp. Roane went down to find Jean sitting by the fire.

"You came back!" she exclaimed, at sight of him. "Those men—"

"Figured to kill us, but we gave them a little boat ride in return. Sent 'em off down the river on a log."

His arm went around her, drawing her close. "We got to make tracks out of this country fast. We're not waiting for the Garys. We'll hitch your team to that old buckboard for an ambulance for Tom. We got to take Nab and Linda Stevens with us; there's horses for everybody. Do you think you could sneak up to the house and get Nab and Linda to come down here? Tell them a big war is due to break in this country. Coulter is bringing out a bunch of men tonight to start a real war. We've got to travel to Dawn Canyon where we'll be with friends."

## CHAPTER VIII

### *Unseen Assassin*

JEAN CARVEL had no trouble in getting to the Cross Seven ranch house undetected. Lights still burned in several of the rooms, but those occupied by Linda and Nab were dark; the two were evidently asleep. Linda had not been told that the Garys were coming to take Tom away. Tom's father had been afraid that she might reveal the secret. Jean, reaching one of the windows of the suite occupied by the two women, rapped on it lightly.

Someone stirred in a bed and the nurse, Nab, came to the window, her gaunt figure attired in a high-necked nightgown.

"There's to be real war started in here tomorrow. Gid Coulter is bringing out a bunch of men from Hurley. Andy and Roane say we've got to leave," Jean explained in a whisper. "Threllen sent four men out tonight with Andy and Roane to kill them, but they sent the four men down the river on a log. We're all to go to the Garys tonight, and we've got to leave at once. Tell Linda she can't stay here any longer."

"I'll tell her. And I'll be thankin' the Lord on my knees when and if we git outa here," said the nurse. "I've expected to wake up and find myself killed in my bed almost any night for a long time. Hark!"

Horses were riding down canyon to the ranch—at least a dozen of them. These, Jean guessed, would be the group brought by Gid Coulter. One rider came straight to the house; the others went to the bunkhouse below. Threllen's voice came, greeting the newcomer.

Acting on an impulse, while Nab and Linda Stevens were getting ready, Jean went through the dark courtyard toward the lighted windows of the big hall-like room, keeping close to the shadow of the wall. The windows of the room were uncurtained. A tall raw-boned husky with a hooked nose was entering, Threllen following. Fred Temple was already in the room.

"This is an unexpected pleasure, seeing you out here, Coulter," Temple said in his arrogant way.

"I could do with a drink," said Coulter, and going to a cabinet, brought out a whiskey decanter and a glass and poured liquor. Then throw-

ing the drink down his throat, he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Temple, you been botchin' up things out here," he said deliberately. "I told you not to deal with those two men that said they wanted to buy horses. They didn't come here for horses. Someone had 'em come in here—we don't know who. Whoever it was paid that thousand dollars just to get that pair to the ranch. Threllen has had them taken care of, but it could have been serious. You don't seem to realize you're not really running the ranch, Temple."

"No?" sneered Temple. "As administrator of the Stevens estate, I control most of the common stock of the Cross Seven Company, in addition to the stock I own personally."

"Stock!" Coulter laughed. "Just a lot of paper." He poured himself another drink. "You're a slick one, Temple. It was a slick idea, making people think Addison Stevens had gone crazy before he was killed. And arranging it to get the daughter declared crazy legally—and meanwhile tryin' to drive her crazy. You figured it would be easy to prove Hamlin Stevens insane, and with the girl and uncle declared loco by a court, you'd have the same as sole ownership of the whole ranch."

Temple shrugged. "No trick to it. Everyone knows about Hamlin and it's been my opinion that Linda is not mentally responsible. We now have the evidence to show it in court. Mrs. McNab, a graduate nurse, will testify that the girl is not responsible."

"A wonderful scheme," remarked Coulter. "But it's got one bad flaw. You've been fool enough to overlook one thing."

Temple stiffened. "I don't like your talk, Gid."

The saloonman-gambler shrugged. "You'll have to learn to like it. I'm taking charge here tonight. Threllen and the others will be taking my orders—not yours."

Jean Carvel, crouched outside the open window, was watching and listening so intently that she almost forgot to breathe. It was like a scene from a play, but no play could ever be a tenth as dramatic. To her it seemed that Coulter was playing with the hapless Temple, as the proverbial cat with its proverbial mouse.

"Threllen," said Temple, "see that this fellow leaves the ranch and doesn't come back."

Threllen was humorless; there was not the ghost of a grin on his face. He merely remained grimly silent.

Gid Coulter, however, grinned, wolfishly, and Temple realized suddenly what he was up against: that Threllen was Coulter's man, and that the other men on the ranch would take Threllen's orders.

"I see," he said. "There seems nothing for me to do but to leave you in charge and have you thrown out in the courts. That won't be difficult. I can get friends to advance me enough to pay off the money you loaned to the ranch."

Coulter's grin widened. "Courts, is it? We're in a canyon of the River Night. A long ways from a court, Temple. I hand it to you, you've been playing a slick game, to get this ranch by shutting up your relatives for insanity and at the same time driving out your neighbors. You're a good enough horseman to know the ranch is a millon-dollar proposition here, that the horses running on the range could bring in a couple hundred thousand dollars cash sold to the right parties. A slick game, Temple, but you're licked."

"We'll see," declared Temple confidently. "You can't scare me. If anything happens to me here, there'd be an inquiry that would send you to the gallows. I've got friends behind me; my wife would see to it that they'd send in a bunch of detectives."

"Would they now?" asked Coulter, and chuckled. "Detectives wouldn't get far in this country. I'm not trying

to scare you. I'm just making an offer. I've got a few papers that either you sign or you don't leave here alive." He brought out a long heavy envelope from his pocket.

"I'll be damned if I sign anything!" snarled Temple. "You can't bluff me."

"In signing these papers," said Coulter, "you admit to being responsible for the killing of a few men, including Addison Stevens. You admit also to having made it look as if Addison Stevens got in a fight with one of the Garys and Neils, when they were really killed separately by your hired gunmen, and the bodies arranged so it would be laid to a gun battle. And you admit that you started a war of extermination against your neighbors."

"I'm damned if I sign any such thing!" burst out Temple.

"You'll be damned if you don't." Coulter's sixgun slithered up out of its holster. "The Night River has covered up a lot of bodies in its time, it's big enough to cover yours too."

"You can't shoot a man in cold blood, Coulter," protested Temple. "You're not as low as that."

Coulter's smile only widened, and Temple turned to Threllen, standing watching quietly.

"Threllen, you won't let him do it," Temple appealed to his employee. "You wouldn't see me shot down in cold blood. You're my friend, Threllen."

Threllen said nothing. He merely looked at Temple, and, reading that look, Temple knew he had no chance.

"I'll sign," he said slowly. "I'd have more chance against a pair of rattlers."

Coulter spread the contents of the envelope on a table.

"Blackmail," muttered Temple, after he had scratched his name on the bottom of the pages and Coulter had folded them up and replaced them in the envelope.

"Blackmail, yes, "Coulter admitted. "You'll tell the court you signed under duress, of course. But you're thinking wrong there, Temple."

Something about Coulter's tone made Temple turn pale.

"You mean you're going to kill me anyway?" he asked hoarsely.

"It's the safest way for us, isn't it?" said Coulter. "You've always realized it yourself: dead men tell no tales. You've been getting up an army of men to go over and wipe out the Garys and Neils and McWhirters. You'll be glad to know that's going as you planned it. I brought some more men to help, and you'll be in the saddle here as far as anyone knows. When it's over you'll be found dead, and people will say it served you right. While the Cross Seven you hoped to own for yourself will be owned by somebody else. They'll even say you killed your girl cousin when she's found dead, as she's going to be. You'll be charged with everything. And meanwhile who will take over the ranch? Who do you think, Temple?"

"You," said Temple. "Who else?"

"Wrong. It won't be me. It'll be a smarter man than I am. You're looking at him, Temple."

Temple looked at Threllen and then back at Coulter. Then he stared hard toward the doorway leading into the dining room. He stood as if transfixed, looking into the other room as if he saw a ghost there.

"D-don't let him do it," he stammered. "Don't let him—" The rest of his words were drowned in the loud crash of a rifle from beyond that doorway, fired by someone that Jean could not see. Temple went down all at once, his body collapsing to hit the floor with a thump. Silence followed, until Coulter chuckled.

"Dead center," he said. "Good shooting."

That mysterious murder, the shot fired through the doorway by some unknown, saved Jean Carvel from an outcry that would surely have betrayed her. An ordinary murder would have brought a scream from her, but this sinister, deliberate killing paralyzed her. Her eyes were fixed on the rec-

tangle of the doorway, but no one appeared in it.

Only after a few moments was she able to move at all. Then, horror-struck, she hurried back to the window where Linda and Nab were waiting in darkness. They helped her into the room where she still trembled violently. Then, getting control of herself, she told them briefly what had happened.

Threllen had come into the court. "You heard that shot?" he called.

"Of course I heard it," said Nab tartly. "It was like a cannon. How could I help but hear it?"

"I'll tell you about it in the morning," he said. "Don't worry; someone just accidentally discharged a gun. Tell you all about it in the morning," he added reassuringly.

They waited a few minutes, then, slipping out of a back window, they left the house. A light was shining in Hamlin Stevens' quarters; through the uncurtained windows they saw Linda's uncle sitting at a table which had an array of bottles on it.

"He shouldn't be left here," said Linda. "At least we could give him warning."

"That hog," muttered Nab. "He's so worthless that no one would trouble to kill him. He's too drunk to heed any warning anyway."

They hurried on into a little orchard above the ranch, and went through it before dropping into the main canyon. When they were clear of the house, Jean Carvel told them more in detail what she had seen and heard: the threats of Coulter, and the shot from the unseen assassin.

Andy had the gray Carvel team hitched to the buckboard up canyon. Roane and Clayton Gary used the stretcher to carry the helpless Tom Gary to the rig. The saddle horses had been brought there. The three women swung into the saddles, and they started off, Clayton Gary driving the rig slowly, with Andy and Roane acting as guard, one up ahead, one at the back. There was always a chance of running into some rider. From the bunkhouse came an occasional yell; the men coming out with Coulter must have brought out a supply of whiskey.

The buckboard wheels ground on the rocky trail, despite the slow pace Gary used in driving, but they were far enough away so the noise could not be heard at the Cross Seven.

Jean's heart lightened a little with each rod of trail they covered. Reaching the side canyon that climbed to the rim, Gary pushed the team into a trot on the easier grades. Their luck had held so far, but they guessed it had deserted them when, as they neared the rim, out of Dusk Canyon welled a tremendous clatter of hoofs and loud-pitched yells.

HAMILTON STEVENS

They stopped. If their flight had not been discovered, the cavalcade might continue along Dusk Canyon. Or if the riders turned up the side canyon, the fugitives could push into the brush to hide.

That hope died as the riders halted at the forks of the trail. Matches flared; the rider group was looking for tracks. Plainly they were following the buckboard.

Maybe the absence of the women at the house had been noticed. At any rate, the flight had been discovered.

**And they were being pursued with every available Cross Seven rider.**

## CHAPTER IX

### *Barbed Wire Trap*

IT WAS a crazy, wild flight, with the buckboard rattling over the rocky trail, as Tom Gary's father urged the team to a lope. The three women — Jean, Linda and Nab—were keeping close behind the rig. Dusk Canyon was a deep well of shadow below, but the moon shone full on the trail making it into a road paved with silver.

A road to death, thought Roane Brandon, as he and Andy checked their horses to drop behind the buckboard. Steadily the hoofs of the small army were hammering up the side canyon, until Roane and Andy could catch fleeting glimpses of the horsemen.

Some distance below the rim, the two calmly dismounted, tied their horses, and then hurried back down the trail, to halt on a narrow ledge where the road lay with a deep canyon on one side and a cliff on the other.

The hoofs, thudding nearer, became a rumble that resounded in the canyon like the steady roll of thunder. Then the leaders streaked around a bend and came in full sight.

"Like shootin' ducks off a pond," murmured Andy Partle, crouching with his rifle barrel resting on a boulder. "Just can't fire into 'em without givin' 'em a little warning. Except if I knowed it was Threllen and Coulter headin' that parade. Or the feller that's bossin' all this wolf pack."

They sent one warning shot, and the men pulled up at once, only to come on again, yelling savagely, sending a hot fire from their rifles. One slug tore fragments from the boulder behind which Andy Partle was squatted. Andy swore and at once opened fire. Roane followed suit.

Two men plummeted from their saddles. That was enough to halt the charge, to send the riders scattering into the brush along the trail. For a few minutes there was a confused shouting below while the guns were still. More riders were coming up, until the side canyon seemed alive with men.

Then the guns opened up almost at once, for a full minute pouring a hail of shots up trail at the two that blocked the way.

Andy and Roane sent a brisk fire in return, and the firing, echoing and re-echoing within the canyon walls, made a deafening uproar. Meanwhile men were advancing afoot. The moonlight helped Andy and Roane: enabling them to make certain targets of two men who foolishly exposed themselves. That stopped the advance, and Roane took advantage of the lull to climb cat-like up a cliff. Working his way along it, he stopped only when he was above the vanguard of attackers. When the group moved forward again, Roane's rifle opened up at a short range.

A man went down, rolling out into the trail, clawing at his chest, screeching with pain. Bullets hammered vengefully all about Roane; he was forced to flatten out until the storm of lead ended. Soon after he rejoined Andy.

Coulter and Threllen had learned a lesson, and cagily they sent men in a wide circle that would take them behind the stubborn pair. That took time, and Roane and Andy used an old trick: stopping firing in the hope that the men below would think that they had retreated. The ruse worked.

"They've gone, git after 'em!" came an order in a voice Roane guessed to be Threllen's. "Git your horses and run 'em down!"

Men mounted again to ride forward, but they did not get far. The two rifles opened up again, and men flung themselves frantically from their saddles.

This time Andy and Roane did actually withdraw to their horses. Mounting, they rode quietly on up to the rimrock, to halt again.

Fearing that they would run into another trap, the group below was slow to follow, waiting for long minutes before advancing warily as if they were crossing a mined battlefield.

On the rim, to Roane's and Andy's astonishment, Jean Carvel met them.

"That place where Dad and I couldn't get our wagon across," she told them rather incoherently, "we got the buckboard over it. Carried Tom Gary across, and then dragged the buckboard with the help of our saddle horses. They're traveling on. Don't stay too long to fight them here. Two of you can't hope to hold them."

"We done a good job of it so far," bragged Andy Partle. "You ride on, young'un; bullets don't know if it's a girl or man they're hittin'. Git!" he ordered sternly. "And keep poundin' along the trail. 'Fore long you ort to be runnin' into them Garys headed over this way to fetch Tom."

The girl obeyed reluctantly, riding on, while Andy and Roane followed at a more leisurely pace, with ears cocked alertly for sounds along the back trail. They had traveled a mile or more before they heard the faint click of hoofs behind them again. Andy Partle, leading the way, set a faster pace. On the open mesa there was no chance of holding back even a dozen men, but where the road dipped into one of the big canyons running into the Night, they could make another stand. The buckboard, they judged, would need a lot of time to climb up out of that canyon and go across the mesa above Dawn Canyon.

As he rode, Roane was thinking of the trail ahead. It would be a race to reach Clayton Gary's ranch, but getting there meant no safety. Coulter and Threllen had enough men to force a way through the fence blocking the gorge or, failing that, to make a wide circle to drop in on the ranch, wiping out the defenders of the Gary ranch house. They could ride on to the other ranches in Dawn and Star Canyons, staging a massacre at each place. That outfit of killers had to be stopped. The problem was how.

Considering possible ways, Roane thought of Gary Gorge, that narrow deep trench closed in by sheer rock cliffs which a chipmunk could not climb. He had thought on his ride through the gorge that it would make a wonderful natural trap for wild horses. In a way this chase was like many of the chases he had made to capture bands of mustangs. Only in this chase, he was running with the hunted, chased by a wolf pack that would tear them to pieces.

As the mesa began to dip toward the canyon, they heard a sudden clatter of hoofs from horsemen ahead of them. Andy Partle checked his mount.

"They sure ain't circled and got ahead of us," he growled.

"No, you knothead," returned Roane and spurred his horse. "It's the Garys, coming over for Tom."

Four riders emerged from the trees and swept toward them, only to turn to ride along with the pair. They could not afford to stop; the hammer of hoofs was growing louder behind them. Of the four riders two were Jean Carvel and Clayton Gary. Dr. Will Gary had been in the rescue party and had taken Clayton's place in the buckboard with his nephew. The other two riders were Tom's brothers, Ed and Lee.

They now had five men to hold back pursuit, but even five were too few to hold back the little army long.

"We can make it to the ranch all right," shouted Clayton to Roane, riding alongside. "What happens after is what worries me. There's only eight families of us living in Dawn and Star. A fifteen-year-old Neil boy came along with us to help fetch Tom. When we met your rig, we sent him hightailing it ahead to get all the folks in the canyons to come to my ranch to meet this gun outfit. All we can do is to hole up and fight 'em off, until outside help comes. Which will take a day or so, if any help comes at all."

"Maybe we can do better than hold

'em off," Roane returned. "I've trapped more than a few bands of wild horses in my life."

"So have I," returned Clayton, over the drum of hoofs. "Drove 'em into natural corrals or pens we built. But what's trapping mustangs got to do with this flock of buzzards?"

"Just this," explained Roane. "You've got a natural horse trap in that gorge, and with both ends of it closed, you'd have a corral strong enough to hold men. You've got the lower end of it closed by that fence at your ranch. If you had the upper end blocked, this Coulter-Threllen bunch would be trapped. The upper end is only a few yards across, and I noticed a pile of barbed wire rolls there."

"Yeah, we intended to make a fence there to keep our horses from driftin' over on the Cross Seven range."

"That same wire strung across the gorge and helped by a few riflemen could keep a big bunch of men penned in. You haven't got enough men to fight this bunch a battle on even terms, but I figure there's enough of us to keep 'em penned in that gorge. Both day and night, as long as the moon is as bright as it is now."

Clayton Gary silently chewed over the proposition as they dropped into the depths of the canyon. He was still considering it when they climbed out. They had gained on the buckboard with Linda and Nab still riding close behind it. The rig would need time to travel the steep trenches and switchbacks by which the road descended into Dawn Canyon and Gary Gorge. It was time to make another stand.

The four men, with Jean still stubbornly staying with them, halted on the canyon rim, dismounting to take cover. Once more the pursuing cavalcade thudded up, to meet a hail of shots and to scatter before it. And again Coulter and Threllen sent men in a circle. On the rim the five fanned out to meet this maneuver, spreading out to keep the circlers from getting past them. For fully ten minutes there was a hot exchange of shots, then the men and Jean Carvel raced on.

It was only then that Clayton Gary gave his judgment on Roane's plan. "That scheme of yours," he said, "is all right. With both ends of the gorge closed, we'd have a fair chance of holding 'em there. A monkey couldn't climb those walls. There's just one break in them that men could use to get up outa there afoot, but we can watch that spot. We'll try it. I'll stay behind with my boys to put up that fence and build us a barricade. The upper stretch of the gorge is as bare as an egg—no cover at all for men to crawl along it."

"Better let me stay in your place," volunteered Roane. "You know your neighbors. You go on and get them organized to hold that fence. That's where these snake bloods will try hardest to break through."

Gary nodded. "All right. We'll hold 'em below. There ought to be five or six men and older boys down there by now, with more coming."

Near the upper end of the gorge, they met two of the Gary neighbors, men from the McWhirter family who had come to help get Tom Gary back from the Cross Seven. These two volunteered to stay with Roane and Lee and Ed Gary to block the upper end of the gorge.

Jean and Clayton Gary rode on, leaving the five men who tied their horses back of some huge boulders and waited. Five minutes later the first of the Cross Seven riders came by, and then the main body, a flowing river of horsemen in the moonlight, pouring into the shadows of the gorge walls. The five waited until the last straggling riders had gone, then they set to work, hastily unrolling the spools of wire, fastening the strands to trees and jagged pinnacles of rock, erecting a barricade with dangling loops of wire that made a barbed tangle of metal snakes across the head of the gorge.

Then they built boulders into a wall on a little shelf some twenty feet above the gorge floor. This was to serve as

a barricade behind which riflemen could crouch to cover the stretch behind the wire trap.

By then at the other end of the short gorge the firing had started, hot and heavy. Coulter and Threllen were evidently attacking the high fence below the Gary house.

Roane was anticipating that Threllen and Coulter would try their old tactics if they met too strong opposition: Send part of their force back through the gorge to circle along the rims and jump the Gary ranch on a flank. Fifteen minutes later, the thud of hoofs sounded along the gorge, and half a dozen riders came in sight, to race unsuspectingly toward the wire barrier.

Roane and the others behind the stone barricade on the shelf held their fire until the riders swept into a moonlit stretch. When their rifles boomed, it was plain slaughter. Two men were instantly dumped from their saddles. The rest frantically scurried back, leaving the fallen men where they lay.

It was plain that three men were easily adequate to hold this end of the gorge. Judging by the heavy firing, help might be needed at the other end. Lee Gary and Roane left afoot, climbing to the rim of the gorge and traveling along it until they were above the Gary ranch. The guns were still making a harsh bellowing bedlam of sound below. So far at least the attackers had been unable to penetrate the high fence across the gorge.

Roane's black-and-tan hound, which he had left at the Gary ranch when he had taken Dan Carvel there, came from the ranch house to greet his master with his usual single deep bark. Stopping at the house, Roane found Jean, Nab and two neighbor women of the Garys preparing a hot meal for the fighters.

Dan Carvel was in bed, demanding querulously that, broken leg or no broken leg, he be carried to a place where he could help in the battle. Tom Gary was in another room, with Linda Stevens attending him.

There was no time to stop at the house, however. The guns were raising a fresh uproar below. Roane hurried down to join in the defense of the ranch.

## CHAPTER X

### *Battle of Gary Gorge*

ROANE found Andy Partle, Clayton Gary and two neighbors firing from behind a wall of stones loopholed for their rifles and looking down on the high wire fence in the gorge bottom. Other riflemen were located behind barricades on the slope.

The moon and stars were fading fast before the slowly approaching day, and as Roane arrived, the Threllen-Coulter men were making use of the faint light to try an advance. It was a cautious one, however, with men keeping under close cover as they moved forward in an attempt to reach the fence. Fully half of the force stayed behind to hail shots at the rifle barricades on the slope. Coolly, calmly, deliberately, the Garys and their neighbors fired whenever a target presented itself. Before that slow, deadly shooting, the advance was stopped cold.

Coulter and Threllen withdrew their men to some boulders in the gorge bottom and the guns fell silent.

"We got a bear by the tail," remarked Andy Partle as he reloaded his rifle. "It's like having a bunch of hornets in your back pocket. As long as you keep 'em buttoned tight in there, you're safe."

Clayton Gary nodded. "We'll keep 'em there. Besides the two ends of that gorge, there's only one way of getting out—by a sort of chimney worn by flood water. They may find that chimney when it comes full day, and crawl up it. We'll have to be waiting for 'em."

He grinned at Roane suddenly. "Your mantrap's worked fine so far. Lee just

told me you didn't have much trouble at the other end."

Roane chuckled grimly. "No, it was the other bunch that had all the trouble."

Dr. Will Gary, a cigar stuck jauntily in his mouth, and lugging a long-barreled rifle, crawled over to join them. "Enough men down there to burn us all out if they ever get loose," he remarked. "I just can't believe what I'm seeing and hearing. Jean Carvel says they killed Fred Temple, intending to put the blame for this whole ruckus on him. And she said Coulter admitted he wasn't boss of all this; that the boss was the man that shot Temple from that room, only Jean didn't see who he was. Who he could be is something I can't figure out."

As full day came, the shots again began buzzing up angrily. Then they suddenly stopped, and a man, after waving a rag that might be called white, showed himself. Coming closer, the flag bearer was revealed as Gid Coulter. He marched up to the fence and halted.

Clayton Gary showed himself on the slope. "What you wantin'?" he called.

"We'll give you one chance to get out of this with your lives," called Coulter. "Quit now and we'll let you have a week to take your families and your stock out of these canyons. You can't lick us. You can't hold us down here; we'll find a way out."

"Coulter," said Clayton, astounded by the man's brass, "on top of all else you're a fool. This country won't stand for a massacre by a red man or white. You can try to blame this on Temple but we know Temple is dead and you and Threllen and every one of your bunch will pay for this."

"Try to collect that pay," snarled Coulter. "Nobody is going to do anything to any of us. This will go down as just a neighborhood quarrel. Are you quitting or not? It's your last chance."

"Get out of my sight!" raged Gary. "Before I lose control of my trigger finger! We'll hunt the highest tree in the country to hang you from. Along with Threllen and whoever is the big boss of your gang."

Coulter retreated and the guns started up again in a renewed fury. Some of the attackers were going along the cliff walls hunting for a way of escape, while the Garys and their neighbors trailed them along the rim of the gorge, angling down shots whenever they saw targets. One man succeeded in climbing to a ledge that seemed to promise a route to the rim. Lee Gary discovered him and fired a wild shot. The man, however, was scared and, losing his hold, fell some thirty feet to land in a crumpled heap.

The sun began to shine down with an increasing warmth that gave promise of an oven heat later in the day. Reluctantly the Cross Seven riders were forced to realize that they were in a jam, caught in a rock-girt pen whose two gateways were defended by stubborn riflemen. There was no hope of successfully attacking those blocking fences in daylight. Their best chance was in waiting until night, hoping that a mountain storm might come up, bringing a darkness that would enable them to cut through one of the fences. But Coulter and Threllen evidently weren't willing to wait. They seemed possessed by the fierce desire of all trapped animals for freedom. There must be some other way out, and with a cautious regard for the watching rifles, they continued to search for it, not overlooking any possible out for them.

It was half an hour before one of the group discovered the chimney-like crack in a cliff wall. Climbing it, the man came to a water trough channeled in the rock and angling steeply upward. Unaware that eyes were watching from above, he returned jubilantly to report his discovery. Shortly afterward, some ten men began crawling up the chimney, with rifles fastened to their backs. Below, the remainder of the Threllen-Coulter force had opened up a hot fire, keeping their guns boom-

ing to cover the escape of part of their crew.

A hard climb brought the ten, led personally by Threllen and Coulter, to the bottom of a shallow well of rock just below the rim. The sides of this well were some twenty feet high but slanted so that an acrobatic man could scramble up it and assist the others to join him.

As they rested for a few minutes from the climb, a pebble fell from the lip of the well and clattered at their feet. The men all glanced up nervously.

"We could have made that a fifty-pound boulder," called down Roane, who had been given command of the party of six men that had been waiting patiently. "You fellows can climb on up but leave your guns behind you. You won't need them any more."

George Threllen stared up hard at the screen of cedars that grew on the lip of the well, trying to pierce the particular curtain from which the voice had sounded.

"You're the fellow that was camped below the ranch," he said accusingly. "Damn those four that let you and your partner get away. If I'd only shot you down when we had you surrounded in your camp, we'd have dodged all this trouble."

"All that's water passed under the bridge," Roane returned. "Are you quittin', Threllen, or not? We're sure not letting you go back. Make up your mind and do it quick. Your outfit is too dangerous to play around with."

Threllen stepped close to Coulter and muttered something to him. When Coulter shook his head, Threllen cursed him. Threllen had a certain bull-headed bravery about him, and just now a blind unreasoning rage.

"Go to hell," he bawled as answer to the invitation to surrender, and swung up his rifle, to begin pulling the trigger, shooting blindly at the cedar screen. The first shot threw the rest of the men into confusion. Most of them jumped away as far as possible from Threllen, pressing their bodies against the sides of the deep cup in which they had been trapped. As they jumped they yelled that they quit. Coulter and one other man turned to try to slip back down the way they had come, hoping to escape.

From above, the guns boomed a heavy echo to Threllen's shots. Threllen went down, trying vainly to keep his big legs under him. Even lying on the rocky floor, he tried to raise his rifle to his shoulder to fire a last shot. But that effort was too great for him. A slug, sent by Lee Gary, had smashed through Threllen's chest.

The man who had attempted to escape with Coulter had been ahead of the saloonman-gambler. Taking a desperate chance, he half leaped, half slid down a small cliff, missed by the bullets raining from above. Coulter, following him frantically, was not so lucky; a rifle shot caught him in the back, sent him sprawling.

With that the battle was over, almost as soon as it had begun.

The rest of the men in the rock cup, with their rifles dropped, were still screeching that they quit and keeping their hands raised high as proof that they meant what they yelled.

They were ordered to climb from the hole, leaving Threllen and Coulter. Roane and Andy Partle descended to look at the pair. Andy turned Threllen over with a foot for an examination.

"Dead as a petrified Injun maid," he announced. "And I'm hopin' the same for Mister Coulter."

Andy was doomed to disappointment on that point. Coulter was still alive, but able to do no more than glare up at Andy.

"Likely to have to waste a lot o' good whiskey and grub tryin' to keep him alive until they kin hang him," Andy said sourly.

Lariats had been brought, and one of them now was used to lift Coulter from the hole. Then with two of the other prisoners carrying the wounded Coulter, Roane and Andy started back toward the Gary ranch, threading a

course above the cliffs. Lee Gary was left to guard against any attempt at further escape by way of the water course.

When the party reached the ranch, they found that the guns of the men trapped in the gorge were still. The one man who had slid back safely had returned to his companions to tell them of the disaster that had met Coulter, Threllen and the others. Everything had been staked on the hope that the Threllen-Coulter group would be able to surprise the ranchers from the rear. With that hope gone and their two leaders missing, they had no resistance left.

Hungry and disheartened, they asked for a parley. A little later they marched out with their hands up. They were herded with the other prisoners into a little natural rock pen, where they were given food and held under guard.

By this time nearly the whole population of Dawn and Star Canyons had arrived at the Gary ranch. A few men argued hotly for a wholesale hanging of the Cross Seven gunmen, but cooler counsel prevailed. Some of the men working for the Cross Seven might have been persuaded that they were fighting on the righteous side of a range war; their punishment was for the courts to decide. As for two of the ringleaders, Threllen was dead and Dr. Gary gave Coulter but a few hours to live.

A committee of three men was chosen to ride to Hurley, to notify not only the sheriff, a close Coulter friend, but in addition a score of leading citizens who would be asked to come out to thresh over the battle of Gary Gorge and the events leading up to it.

Meanwhile the ranchers of Dawn and Star Canyons were quietly jubilant. They had lost no men in the battle in the gorge. Young Tom Gary, for the first time since he had been carried to Jean Carvel's camp, was pronounced out of danger by his uncle. Dan Carvel's broken leg needed only time to mend.

Roane Brandon and Andy Partle had headed for the kitchen, with the satisfaction that the job which had brought them to help Linda Stevens was done. She had escaped the dangers which Nab had rightly feared threatened the girl.

The kitchen was crowded with strange women, which was all right with Andy Partle. He barged right up to the stove, grabbing an empty plate on the way. Roane, however, hesitated in the doorway, and Jean Carvel, knowing what he had come for, filled a plate with the old ranch standbys, beef and beans, and brought it to him. Then while he ate on a bench outdoors, she sat beside him.

"All over," he remarked cheerfully. "And they raise mighty good-tasting beef in this country. Raise almost as good cattle, I guess, as they do horses."

"Can't you forget horses?" Jean said teasingly.

He put down his plate and laid his hand on hers. "It's a good idea to try to forget things like those that happened last night, Jean. I'd rather remember the campfires I saw in here, and seeing you by their light. I'd like to see you beside a lot of campfires, in these canyons, Jean. What's happened in here was horrible, but it wasn't the fault of the canyons—just the wrong sort of people. I like this country; I'd like to stay in it. Clayton Gary and the doctor have talked to me about taking over the job of gathering their horses and selling them."

"I've got a better job for you that that. Linda told me that she'd like to have you take over the job of running the Cross Seven. You and Tom Gary. Linda's certain now that her father was never insane, and she's not afraid to marry Tom."

"It could be worked out—to work for the Cross Seven, I guess," admitted Roane. "I'm kind of thinking that my partner will want to be over here near Nab. We could sell our ranch for enough to buy an interest in the Cross Seven. But I'd do that only if you

stayed here too, with me. Will you, Jean?"

"I'll stay wherever you are," she said simply. "But Roane, there's something that still bothers me. The rest seem to have forgotten it, but we still don't know who shot Fred Temple through that doorway. We don't know who engineered all this, working through Coulter and Threllen," she went on impetuously. "Some man planned to have Linda killed. And no one knows who he is. He might still be making plans."

"You're right on that," he agreed soberly. "Doc Gary has been trying to get it out of Coulter, but so far it's no go."

He turned to look at the door of the leanto where the wounded Coulter had been taken. The door opened suddenly and Dr. Gary stepped out. His face was flushed with anger as he turned toward the open doorway.

"It's the least that you could do to make up a little for all the hell you fellows caused in here," he shouted. "We'll find out sooner or later who was behind all this; you might as well tell us now. Who was it that shot Fred Temple?"

"I shot him," said Coulter promptly from the bed where he lay. "It was a pleasure to see him kick. And there wasn't nobody running this show except me and Threllen. We was only using Temple, cashing in on the dirty scheme he had in his head—getting Addison Stevens killed and starting a range war in here. Me and Threllen we'd have got the ranch through the loan I had made the Cross Seven. It would have been easy with Linda and that drunk fool of a Hamlin dead. I'd have hated to kill Hamlin though; he's the best drinking customer I ever had, Hamlin was."

"Hamlin was what?" croaked someone behind Jean and Roane. They both turned.

Hamlin Stevens was sitting on a sorrel horse ten feet from them. He was clad in a leather jacket, old wool shirt, soiled corduroy breeches and a pair of badly scuffed English riding boots. The frog-like eyes in his sharp-featured face seem to bulge out further than ever.

He chuckled as the doctor stared at him, astonished. "What's been going on over here, Doc?" he called.

"A worse nightmare than you ever had after your sprees," the doctor responded shortly. "You can count yourself lucky you're still alive, Hamlin. They were about to wipe out your whole family—to get the Cross Seven. You probably know that Fred Temple was killed last night? Or don't you?"

Hamlin shrugged. "The China cook told me," he said. "And not much loss if we had been wiped out. These Canyons of the Night have been bad luck for all of us Stevenses."

Beside Roane Jean drew in a sharp breath and her fingers were suddenly digging hard into his arm as she half arose. Roane, looking up, was astonished to find her pretty face drawn and pale, her dark eyes staring wide at the rider on the sorrel.

"Why, what's the matter, Jean?" he asked.

"There!" she exclaimed, in a half-strangled voice. "There!" She lifted her hand and pointed at Hamlin Stevens. "He is the one that killed Fred Temple. He was the man that shot Temple through the doorway."

Both Roane and Dr. Will Gary stared bewilderedly at the girl.

"You don't believe me, but I say he killed Fred Temple. I know it. I just *feel* it," she went on, almost hysterically. "He was the one that would have gotten the Cross Seven with his relatives all dead. He may be insane, but he was smart enough to plan all this. And he'll still go on killing and planning."

Dr. Gary shook his head. "No," he said, "you're mistaken, Jean. Why, Hamlin, he—" His voice trailed off as he looked at the rider of the sorrel. The bugged eyes of the man were staring with a horrible fixity at the girl,

and with a light that never shone from a sane person's eyes.

Then a chuckle came from Stevens. "She's right, Doc," he said in an amused voice. "She's guessed it. She's a smart girl—too smart."

Again Stevens chuckled, and "Look out!" shouted Dr. Gary. "He's got a gun!"

Jean Carvel knew that whether Hamlin Stevens was insane or not, she faced death from the ugly snout of the six-shooter that came up from under the leather jacket and swung slowly toward her. Frozen, she stood, and then a hand and arm were pushing her back over the bench and Roane was springing in front of her. Jean could not have lifted a finger to save herself, but she screamed now, realizing that Roane was taking the bullet intended for her. The bellow of the gun was like the crack of doom in her ears, then desperately she was scrambling to her feet.

The sorrel horse was jumping about under Stevens who was trying to level the still smoking gun to fire again as Roane, unarmed, was running toward the man, straight into the next bullet that would come from the gun.

But before that shot could be fired, a rifle which sounded like a cannon exploded from the direction of the kitchen. Hamlin Stevens, blood flowing from his temple, toppled from his saddle to fall a shapeless lump on the ground. Jean looked back and saw old Andy Partle by the kitchen doorway, holding a long-barreled rifle from which powder smoke curled out lazily.

Andy looked at the fallen figure of the man to make sure that he did not need another shot, and then felt of his shoulder.

"By dang," Roane's partner complained, "this old blunderbuss has got the wu'st kick of anything I ever pulled trigger on. Ort to be a law ag'in weapons like this here."

Jean was looking unbelievingly at Roane who had turned toward her. Plainly he was unhurt. She ran to him shakily.

"How did he ever miss you?" she asked, still unable to believe the miracle. "He wasn't ten feet away when he shot."

"Why, honey," he told her as his arms folded about her, "that was plumb simple. I just shied my empty plate at his horse's head and the sorrel nag jumped so far Hamlin couldn't have hit the side of a barn if he'd been shooting from inside it."

"He might have killed you," sobbed Jean.

"Look," he went on gently, "I told you what has happened in here we'll forget. It's looking ahead that we'll be doing from now on—to all the campfires we'll have under the stars. And to that big log house with twenty or thirty rooms I'm going to build for you in one of these canyons of the River Night."

She smiled then, her dark eyes shining. "Yes, Roane. We'll look ahead," she promised.

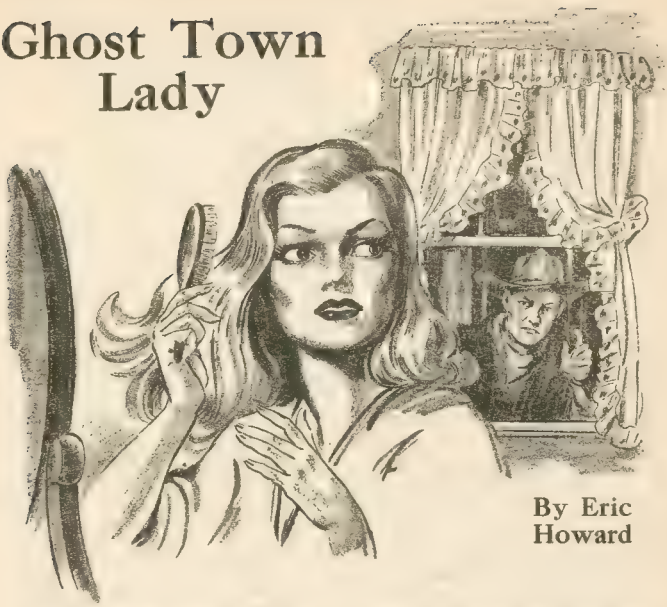
**When a Nazi or a Jappy**

**Starts to shoot, across the pond,**

**You can lick him dead as doornails**

**If you've bought your WARtime BOND**

# Ghost Town Lady



By Eric Howard

*The Judge never could abide a weepy woman, and so old Mrs. Gray kept herself so busy helping out young folks she didn't have time to mourn.*

THERE was no one living in Chaco any more but old Mrs. Gray. Her husband, Judge Gray, had died a year ago. He had started the town and he had always been loyal to it, believing that it would come back. No one except Mrs. Gray shared that belief. All of the houses in the town had long since gone to pieces, but the Gray house, largest and best, was still in good repair. It clung to the side of the canyon wall, above the old street; and Mrs. Gray spent many sunny hours on the big porch.

She was small and frail. She weighed not more than a hundred pounds, but she claimed she was as tough as nails. She kept the old house spic and span, she took great pride in her garden and her chickens. Once a month or so, someone from the railroad town of Butte City visited her. The doctor, perhaps; or Parson Hardy.

Always they urged her to move down to Butte City. Then she laughed at them, and there was something youthful and musical about her laughter. Invariably she would feed her guests fried chicken, biscuits and rich gravy, cooked as only she could cook them.

She had learned to cook, she said, because the Judge was a man who liked good vittles. She had spent her whole life in pleasing the Judge, and now

that he was gone, she was loyal to his memory and his town. He was buried on a high hill above Chaco.

This morning, having fed her chickens and watered her garden and swept her house, the old lady sat down in a hand-made rocker on the porch. Never idle, she picked up some fancy work. Gazing far off across the tawny desert as it stretched toward Butte City, she saw a faint cloud of dust.

"Monday—and company comin'," she murmured. "That's strange. I'd better pick a mess of butter beans and dress a fryer or two. No tellin' who it might be. Could be one of the syndicate men, Judge, come to buy the mine." She laughed quietly. "But we won't sell. Not us! Chaco's our town and we'll hang on."

She reached for a pair of field-glasses and held them to her blue eyes.

"Bless my heart!" she said. "It's a lady. Wonder who it can be. None of the ladies in Butte like to ride any more. All soft and fat and lazy, the way town folks get. Well, whoever it is, she'll be here inside an hour. I'd best get busy."

She hummed as she worked. She had discovered, long ago, during her first years of loneliness on the desert, that if one didn't stay happy one would be miserable. That was her philosophy and it worked well.

"If you have to scrub a floor," she often said, "you'd better sing at it."

She was again sitting, composed and serene, on the wide porch, with her food all ready for the stove, when the rider came up the trail. Through her field-glasses, she saw that her visitor was young and slender. The girl paused now and then to look over the deserted ghost town.

When she was dismounting, just below, Mrs. Gray went to the porch rail and called down, "Good mornin' to you."

The girl looked up and smiled. "Oh, good morning! You're Mrs. Gray, aren't you?"

"Nobody else. Take your horse around back. Put him in the corral. I'll be out there in a jiffy."

"Thank you!"

Mrs. Gray liked the girl's looks. It was nice to have a visitor like her for a change, someone young and happy-looking.

"Mighty sweet face," she murmured. "Pretty auburn hair framin' it, mighty near the color of her sorrel. Looks capable, too, and not foolish, like some I can think of."

She hurried through the house and out the back door. The girl had led her horse into the corral and was now unsaddling.

"It's been a hot trip," she said, smiling at the old lady.

"Come on out on the porch and get cool. There's water there and some hay. Your horse'll be all right."

The girl followed her through the house to the porch, looking at the old furniture. Mrs. Gray urged her to sit down, and she herself took up her needlework. She waited quietly for her visitor to speak.

"I'm Mary Grant," the girl said, "and I've come all the way from my uncle's ranch, up near Denver."

Mrs. Gray nodded. "The Judge and I visited Denver a few times. A pretty city. We stopped at a grand hotel and we had a wonderful time. The Judge bought me a dozen silk dresses and we went to dances and theaters." She laughed to herself. "The Judge was my husband, Mary. The folks here made him judge when Chaco was a big town."

"They told me in Butte City that you live here all alone."

"Yes, I do. Bless me if I know why anybody would live in Butte when they might live in Chaco! It's my town and I like it."

The girl frowned. "I came here to meet Jerry Lansing," she said. "I couldn't believe what they told me in Butte City. Because, you see, Jerry wrote me that he was here—that he'd be waiting for me here. They said they hadn't heard of him, that there was no one around here by that name."

"Jerry Lansing? No, I can't place him. There was a Lansing here, years ago. Tom, his name was. I remember him. A big, quiet man. The Judge liked him, I recall."

"I don't understand it," the girl said. She drew an envelope from the pocket in her blouse and took out a letter. She read it. "He says as plain as anything that I should be here the 15th. He even told me where to hire a horse in Butte City to ride out here. He says he finally struck it rich and that we'll be married and go on south to the ranch he wants to buy."

Mrs. Gray sensed her worry. "Well," she said quietly, "the 15th is tomorrow. This Mr. Lansing may turn up by then. Have you known him long?"

"Oh, yes, for years. But I haven't seen him for nearly four years. I haven't heard from him very often. But—well, we always planned to be married. So—well, when this letter came, I just skipped. And now—"

"Come on into the kitchen with me," Mrs. Gray suggested. "I was just goin' to fix dinner."

"I can't understand why no one seems to know Jerry. Or why he wanted me to meet him here, instead of Butte City. He didn't tell me Chaco was a ghost town."

"It isn't," Mrs. Gray said crisply. "Not while I'm here."

She put the girl to work in the kitchen, to take her mind off Jerry Lansing. She herself whipped up a batch of biscuits, floured the chicken and set the butter beans on to cook. As she worked, she spoke cheerfully of her garden and her happiness in Chaco. While the chicken was browning in the big skillet, she heard a horse outside and went out on the back porch.

ELL, Tommy Barnes!" she called out happily. "You're just in time. Come in."

Deputy Sheriff Tom Barnes swung down from the saddle and walked toward her, spurs jingling. He swept off his big hat and smiled at her.

"You've got company?" he asked, glancing at Mary's horse.

"Yes, a young lady from Denver. She was in Butte yesterday, rode out this mornin'. So wash your face and slick your hair down, Tommy. Get a hustle on."

She spoke to him as if he were still the ten-year-old Chaco orphan who had run errands for the Judge. Tommy was used to that.

"I haven't been in Butte for a week," he said. "Trailin' a feller. He got away from me."

"Then you'll be ready for something good to eat. Who was he, Tommy?"

"Goes by the name of Jud Lane. Robbed a bank down below. I was right close to him. The son of a gun just melted away. I can't understand it."

"I'm ashamed of you! The Judge taught you to track anything on feet. Well, hurry up. The table's set."

Tom Barnes washed up outside, combed his dark hair, and then walked into the kitchen. Mary Grant was standing at one side, neatly slicing tomatoes from Mrs. Gray's garden. It wasn't strange that Tom saw her first. The light from the window fell upon her hair and made it golden. Tom looked at her for a long moment, scarcely hearing Mrs. Gray's introduction.

"Oh, if you're a deputy sheriff," Mary said, "you've probably heard of Jerry Lansing. Maybe you know him. He wrote me once that he had been helping the sheriff."

"No," Tom shook his head, "I can't say I've heard of him."

"Well, it's the strangest thing!" Mary declared. "All his letters, lately, have been mailed from Butte City, yet nobody knows him."

"Lot of prospectors up in the hills," Tom explained. "Might be one of them."

"Of course," Mrs. Gray agreed. "He'll show up tomorrow, Mary. Eat hearty, folks."

Early in the afternoon, Tom announced that he would have to be getting on.

"Back to Butte?" Mrs. Gray asked.

"I reckon—if I don't pick up the trail again. Well, good-by. If this gent doesn't show up, miss, send me word. I'll look for him."

Mary smiled at him. "Oh, I'm sure he'll be here. Jerry wouldn't disappoint me. We're going to be married, you know."

Tom rode off, and Mrs. Gray spent most of the afternoon talking about him—what a fine boy he was, what the Judge had thought of him, how he had lost his parents when he was just a lad and how he had worked and proved himself.

Mrs. Gray retired early, after a light supper, after showing Mary to an old-fashioned room. Mary was sitting before a long mirror, with a lamp on her right, brushing her hair, when she heard a faint tapping on the window. The sound startled her and she dropped the brush.

"Sh!" someone whispered. "Don't wake the old lady. It's me—Jerry. Turn that lamp down."

Trembling, Mary obeyed. Jerry's voice sounded strange, deep and harsh. But after dimming the light, she moved close to the window.

"Jerry?" she whispered.

"Hello, sweetheart," he said. "I saw you when you rode up here, but I didn't want the old lady to know I was around. Then that deputy sheriff—How are you, Mary?"

"I—I'm fine, Jerry," the girl said uncertainly. "But—but why doesn't anyone know you? Why didn't you want Mrs. Gray to see you? I don't understand."

"I can explain all that. I told you I struck it rich. Well, when that happens in this country a man has to keep it secret. Now listen! You stay here all day tomorrow. Just before sundown you tell the old lady you want to take a little ride. You ride down the hill till you come to the old Silver Queen mine—there's a big old sign on a buildin' there. I'll meet you there and we'll get goin'."

"Where, Jerry?"

"On south—to the ranch I wrote you about."

"But aren't we going to be married in Butte City? Why didn't you meet me there?"

"I'll tell you all about it tomorrow. I don't want the old lady to hear me—she's sharp. We'll be married on the way south. You'll be crazy about this ranch, honey. Now just do as I say. You won't be sorry, sweetheart. I've got to go now. Tomorrow—at sundown."

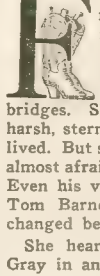
"All right, Jerry," she whispered.

"Another thing—don't call me Jerry. I've had to use another name so they wouldn't get wise to what I've been doing. If they knew I was Lansing, they'd know what I was after. Call me Jud, Mary, Jud Lane."

"Jud Lane!" Mary gasped, her hand against her lips.

"Yeah. Good night. See you tomorrow."

Before she could speak, he had drifted into the darkness. Crouching near the window, the girl stared out into the night. Jud Lane—that was the name of the man Tom Barnes was hunting. He said he had robbed a bank.



FOR a long time Mary was motionless. Hopeful of a new life with Jerry, whom she remembered as a gay and handsome and daring boy, she had burned her bridges. She couldn't return to her harsh, stern uncle with whom she had lived. But she was afraid of the future, almost afraid of Jerry. He had changed. Even his voice had changed. If what Tom Barnes said was true, he had changed beyond all belief.

She heard a deep sigh from Mrs. Gray in an adjoining room. She listened. But the old lady seemed to be asleep. Quietly, Mary prepared for bed. She lay perfectly still, looking out into

the night. She couldn't sleep. If Jerry Lansing had become Jud Lane, bank robber, she knew that all her romantic dreams of escape into a new life were ended. And yet, she told herself, she owed it to Jerry to give him a chance to explain. Perhaps Tom Barnes was mistaken. Tomorrow she would meet Jerry, as he requested, and she would listen to him. Then she would know what she must do.

Mrs. Gray greeted her in the morning with a bright smile and a happy word. Mary looked tired and pale, but it was impossible to be discouraged in Mrs. Gray's presence. The little old lady boasted of the size and freshness of her eggs and cooked more of them than Mary could eat. After breakfast, she stacked the dishes, took the girl with her into the garden. She talked a good deal about Tommy Barnes. When Mary became pensive, Mrs. Gray put her arm around her and said, "Now don't worry, honey. If this beau of yours isn't here today, he'll likely show up tomorrow. You're welcome to stay with me just as long as you like. I enjoy havin' you here."

"Thank you. But I'm sure Jerry will be here today."

"Tommy might show up, too. He never gives up, Tommy don't. He'll likely catch that man he's after. Might stop in with his pris'ner."

Mary trembled and looked down the hill. Somewhere, down there, Jerry Lansing—Jud Lane—was hiding, not wishing to be seen by Mrs. Gray or the deputy sheriff.

But the day passed swiftly and pleasantly. In spite of her disturbing thoughts, Mary caught herself laughing at things Mrs. Gray said. She realized why it was that the old lady could live here in Chaco all alone. She never let herself be bored, she was tireless and energetic, she seemed to think of herself as very young.

Late in the afternoon, Mary said hesitantly, "I guess Jerry isn't coming today. I—I'd like to ride down the hill and look over the old camp."

She felt that she was being dishonest, especially when Mrs. Gray peered at her through her steel-rimmed spectacles.

"Go ahead, child, if you want to," she said. "And when you look around, try to picture the town as it was—when it was boomin'. Ah, it was some place then."

She watched Mary ride off down the slope.

"Ah, the poor chick!" she murmured. "Off to meet that worthless, bank-robbin' Jud Lane! Jerry Lansing that was. It's hard to say. Mebbe he was some account four years ago, when last she saw him. The desert makes or breaks a man, the Judge always said. Wonder if he could be any kin to Tom Lansing. Doubt it, though; Tom Lansing was a square man.

"Well, the poor girl don't know which way to turn. I could tell that, last night, listening' to 'em talk. I guess they don't know a person my age don't sleep much, just rests and dreams. He said I was sharp—seemed kind of afraid of me. Well, old lady, up and at 'em! Tommy must 'a' gone on to Butte or he'd 'a' seen your signal, the old flag flyin'. I don't see how Tommy missed this Jud Lane, though. I'd best be goin' down there. No tellin' what lies he'll hand out."

Hastily, she caught up a sunbonnet, knotted the strings under her firm chin. She was wearing an apron. She left it on, and when she took a gun from a wall rack, she thrust it under her apron.

Then, lifting her skirt, she hurried down a steep trail. She said of herself that she was as sure-footed as a goat, and she ran like a girl down the slope.

Pausing near a tumble-down shack that had once been a mine office, she looked ahead. Mary's horse was there near the old Sliver Queen buildings. The girl and Jud Lane were not in sight.

Mrs. Gray advanced cautiously, her head a little on one side. Now and then she halted to listen.

"Ah!" she said.

It was not that she had heard anything. But she saw now where Jud Lane must have found a hide-out, where he had disappeared when Tommy Barnes was trailing him. There was a mound of slag ahead. The ground was covered with it. A horse would leave no tracks there. Over on one side, against the bare hill, there was a tunneled opening. A heavy door led into it.

She knew that inside, down a dark passage, there was a large, timbered, circular room. A man could hide there, could keep his horse inside, could even build a fire without being detected. The smoke would slowly drift upward through cracks and crevices, disappearing before it reached the open.

Mrs. Gray advanced to the heavy door. It had been padlocked and chained, but the lock had been broken off. It was open a few inches. She put her shoulder against it and slipped into the dark tunnel, closing the door behind her.

She heard the man's voice then. It was low, harsh, argumentative:

TOLD you that, Mary. My uncle, Tom Lansing, was here long ago. Gave my father a map before he died. It showed where he cached this gold when a bunch of cutthroats tried to rob him. My father always planned to come here, never got to it. I had to go about it secret, 'cause this property still belongs to the Silver Queen Mine Company. But the gold is mine, heired from Uncle Tom. That's why I took this other name, moved in secret. These lawmen would claim I was stealin' from the mine company if. . . . Come on, girl. You know me well enough to trust me. It's gettin' dark. We'll ride south."

Mary Grant was silent for a moment. Then she spoke with an effort, as though it pained her.

"Is that the truth, Jerry—Jud? You've taken nothing but this gold your uncle—"

"Of course it's the truth!" he declared. "What's the matter with you? Your wrote me how things were up there with your uncle and I sent for you. You oughta show a little gratitude! Come on. It's time to leave."

"Wait, Jerry. Please. Just one thing more. The deputy sheriff, Tom Barnes, was looking for you. For Jud Lane. He said you had robbed a bank. Why should he say that, Jerry, if—if you didn't?"

"Barnes! You takin' his word against mine? Why would I rob a bank? That feller, Barnes, is just another crooked lawman. Workin' for the mine comp'ny and other big outfits. Those fellers are always down on poor men. Railroadin' 'em to jail and kickin' 'em around. That's why I had a friend of mine pick up my mail in Butte. I didn't want to run into that crowd."

"But you wrote me that you had helped the sheriff," Mary quietly reminded him. "You said—"

"We've got an all-night ride ahead of us, girl," he cut in. "We've got to get started. You trust me, don't you? You were eager enough to get away from that stingy old uncle o' yours. There's no time to chew the rag now."

The girl spoke slowly. "I don't know," she said. "I think I've made a mistake. I'm not going, Jerry. I—I just can't."

He seized her shoulders roughly. She gasped.

"You're goin', all right!" he muttered.

There was another sound in the cavern-like room. Mrs. Gray, standing in the tunnel, stiffened. The sound was that of a man groaning as he twisted and writhed on the floor.

"What's t h a t?" M a r y cried. "Who—"

Jerry Lansing swore under his breath. "Never mind that," he snapped. "You stand right here. I'm gettin' my horse."

But the girl ran to the side of the room.

"It's a man, roped and tied. What have you done, Jerry? It's—it's the

deputy sheriff, Tom Barnes. Oh, Jerry!"

"Get away from him! He got what he had comin', sneakin' in here. Workin' for the mine comp'ny, tryin' to stop me from gettin' what belongs to me. The next time I hit him, I'll cave his skull in."

He caught Mary by the arm and pulled her away from the man on the floor.

The girl sobbed and said, "Oh, Jerry, what has happened to you?"

He didn't bother to answer that. Mrs. Gray slipped into the room, swiftly moved along the wall. She knelt beside Tom Barnes. She found a knife in his pocket and cut the ropes that bound him. She put her hands on his head. Close to him, she whispered: "Tommy! Tommy, you must—"

"Sh!" he warned her. "Thanks. I'll take him now. Here's some matches. Wood over there. Get a fire goin', so I'll have some light on him."

"Careful, Tommy! He's armed and dangerous."

The deputy pulled his knees up, shook his head. He slowly got to his feet. Across the room, Mary was sobbing almost inaudibly. Jerry Lansing was putting a bridle on his horse.

Tom Barnes moved across the floor. He heard the girl gasp as she saw him. Then he leaped. He got his left arm around the other man's neck; his right hand closed on Lansing's wrist. He bent him over backwards. Lansing choked and muttered, then, to free himself from Tom's hold, dropped to the floor. But the deputy sheriff clung to him and they rolled over and over, fighting hard.

Mrs. Gray pulled dry bark from cedar wood and applied a match. A flickering flame played over the damp walls of the timbered room.

"Take him, Tommy boy!" she urged.

"Mrs. Gray!" Mary gasped. "You—"

"Come over here, honey," the old lady said. "I heard a lot of what he told you. And if I ever heard a man lyin', he's it. That story of his is plain fishy. If he struck it rich, Tom said how—by robbin' a bank! Leave him to Tommy!"

But Tom Barnes wasn't proving adequate to the task of subduing Lansing. The latter outweighted him by some twenty pounds. Tom's head ached from the gun-clubbing he had received. His whole body seemed stiff and awkward, refusing to obey his will. Lansing's powerful arms and superior weight were too much for him.

Knowing that he must break the clinch and get room to strike at Lansing, he exerted his full strength and broke away. In a stand-up fight, his skill and quickness would serve him well. He leaped back from Lansing as the latter jumped up. Then Tom charged, striking out with left and right.

Lansing did not meet his rush. Instead, he retreated. Mrs. Gray had added light wood to the small fire. Now the whole room was illumined brightly.

Lansing backed against the wall, crouching. His hand darted down to his side. His face, dark and bitter, was twisted into a mask of rage. His gun cleared leather.

"Goin' to kill you, this time!" he muttered.

"No! No, Jerry!" Mary cried.

She started toward him. But a gun spoke before she had taken more than one step. Lansing's arm, extended as he aimed at Tom Barnes, dropped to his side. The gun fell from his fingers. He stared across the firelit circle and saw Mrs. Gray. Then he looked down at his bleeding arm.

"You—" he muttered.

"Me," said Mrs. Gray with satisfaction. "You're not the first man I've had to shoot. But I declare I haven't felt so much like killin' one for years. The Judge always said—"

Tom Barnes suddenly lunged. A well aimed left, an uppercut, clipped Lansing on the chin. He dropped. The deputy sheriff knelt beside him, got out handcuffs and snapped them on his wrists. Then he rolled up Lansing's

sleeve and bound the wound with a clean handkerchief.

"I was wanderin' around, tryin' to pick up his trail," Tom said, "when I saw your flag. I come back here and tried to figger things out. Finally added two and two, when I saw the lock busted off the door here. He must 'a' heard me. He was waitin' in the tunnel and he clubbed me down. Well, lady, as the Judge used to say, you're dynamite when you get riled."

Mrs. Gray laughed. "Had to be, in my time," she said. "Where's your horse, Tom? I didn't see it outside anywhere."

"He likely put it in a shed or somewhere, after layin' me out."

"Well, let's get out of this hole," the old lady said briskly. She crossed over to Mary and put her arm across the girl's shoulders. "Come, child. You've just got to get used to the idea that men change here on the desert. Can you manage him, Tom?"

"Sure," Tom said. "You go on ahead."

MARY was crying softly as they went out through the dark tunnel into the twilight. Mrs. Gray left her there for a moment, and crossed over to a nearby shed. She flung the door open. Tom's horse, still saddled and bridled, was there. She led the horse out and told Mary to mount her own.

"Go on up home, honey," she said gently. "We'll be along. Put the kettle on. Tom will need some strong coffee—and I could use some, too."

Tom led Lansing's horse out of the tunnel. Lansing was lying across the saddle. Tom was carying a pair of saddle bags.

"Bank money's in here," he said. "That story about his uncle's cache of gold—I reckon he just made that up."

"I think so, Tommy. He had to have some explanation of how he struck it rich for Mary. He knew that a fine, sweet girl like Mary wouldn't stand for crookedness. She is a fine girl, Tommy. I'm goin' to keep her with me. She's had a hard time of it, livin' with an uncle that didn't want her, dreaming of this man as he was when he was a boy. I'm going to tell her I'm gettin' old and need her here. You back me up on that, Tommy."

"I sure will," Tom Barnes said, and grinned. "I'd hate to see her leave the country. We're kind of short of pretty girls around here."

Mrs. Gray chuckled. It was high time, she thought, that Tommy began to pay attention to pretty girls.

Tom led Lansing's horse up to Mrs. Gray's house. She followed, leading his. They put the animals in the corral and Tom lifted Lansing from the sadle. He was able to stand now, but all the fight had gone out of him. Mrs. Gray stood before him while Tom unsaddled and fed the horses; she looked steadily at Lansing.

He gave her a surly, insolent stare. She slowly shook her head.

"It's too bad," she said. "I can see the kind of boy you must 'a' been. Unruly and ambitious, wanting to get what you wanted, no matter how. Not strong enough to stick to the slow, hard way. Too bad Tom Lansing didn't have your raisin'."

"Cut out the sermon," Lansing snapped. "If it hadn't been for you, I'd 'a' won. Yeah, I'd 'a' been on my way."

"You couldn't have won," Mrs. Gray said. "Tommy would have got you. If not Tommy, then the sheriff. Or Mary. Mary would have found out how you struck it rich. She wouldn't have stood for it. We've had your kind in Chaco before. You've never won. And I'm always sorry for you."

Lansing muttered something, turned away from her and glared at the deputy sheriff.

"How'd you get on my trail, in the first place?" he demanded.

"You made a mistake," Tom said. "You fellers always do. That no-good friend of yours in Butte, the feller

you had pickin' up your mail and buyin' you supplies, so's you could keep out of sight. You paid him off out of the bank money you stole. He started spendin' it. He got drunk and talkative and we picked him up."

Lansing swore. Mrs. Gray said sharply, "No bad language, young man! Not in Chaco, not before ladies! The Judge made that rule and it still holds. You let one more hell or damn out of you and you won't get a thing to eat. I've fed plenty of badmen—but no cussers!"

"Mind your manners, feller. She means it. And she's the best cook in ten counties. You act decent and I'll treat you square."

Tom's tone was easy-going, friendly. Lansing looked around at him.

"I was goin' to kill you," he said. "Don't you hold that ag'in me?"

"Not no more. Not since you didn't make it. Fact is," he grinned, "it could be I owe you somethin'."

Lansing didn't bother to ask what he meant. His face strained, he said, and his voice broke, "I can't face Mary! Go ahead—lock me up somewhere. But don't drag me in there in front of her."

He locked Lansing in the cellar. Mrs. Gray prepared a tray of good food for him and Tom carried it down. Mrs. Gray followed with iodine, hot water and bandages. She skilfully cleansed and bandaged his arm.

"We'll head for Butte tonight," Tom said. "Might be best. He don't want to see Miss Mary, mebbe she don't want to see him. So we'd better ride."

The old lady nodded. "Come up and eat first, Tommy."

Mary wasn't in the big, old kitchen. She had gone into her bedroom; she stayed there.

"She'll be all right," Mrs. Gray said. "It's a shock, of course. But she'll quiet down, here with me, in Chaco. When'll you be comin' out this way again, Tommy?"

"I get Sunday off. If you'd invite me, real nice, I'd dress up and pay you a call."

"I'll be lookin' for you."

But it was Mary who was looking for him that Sunday morning. She was on the porch and she saw him a long way off. When he came close, she called out a greeting to him. Tom took off his hat and waved. Mary ran down to speak to him.

"What will they do to him?" Mary asked.

"Most of the bank money is recovered, so the bank don't feel very mean. I reckon he won't get more'n a year, and the sheriff says he's goin' to straighten him out. He can do it. Oh, he gave me a letter for you."

"Thank you," Mary said.

"Go ahead and read it. I'll hunt up Mrs. Gray. I'm sure glad you're stayin' with her. She needs you."

Mary didn't mention Lansing's letter when she joined them on the porch. She was quiet and subdued, but not unhappy. She smiled quietly; later, at the table, she burst into laughter at something Mrs. Gray said.

Tom didn't leave until it was dark. Then he called out, "I get next Sunday off, too. Am I invited?"

"You know you are, Tommy," Mrs. Gray said.

Sunday after Sunday Tom showed up in Chaco.

It was on the sixth of these Sundays that Mrs. Gray, about to call them in to dinner, looked out of the back door and saw Mary and Tom near the corral. They were gazing deeply into each other's eyes. Then they embraced, and Tom bent down to kiss her.

Mrs. Gray quietly retreated, and pushed the skillet back on the stove.

"They won't be hungry for quite a spell," she murmured. "Think of it, Judge! Little Tommy Barnes, growed up and kissin' girls! But she's a mighty sweet girl, Judge. They make a fine couple. You'd be proud of Tommy."

She wiped away a tear and got very busy, lest she weep. If a person started crying every time she felt like it, it might get to be a habit. That would never do. The Judge couldn't abide a weepy woman!

# Poker Winnings

## By Austin Corcoran

*Strange how a poker game years back could influence the lives of so many people and even bring young folks together to conquer problems and to love.*

BILL AVERY was on edge with excitement as he swung himself down the steps of the smoker when the train pulled into Hanover. This was several stations before his destination, but he would go on by horseback. And he could make it to Indian Creek by dark, the trail over the ridge being considerably shorter than the route followed by the railroad, but this wouldn't fit into Bill's plans.

He had waited seven years for this return to the Red Hills country, which had finally come with such astonishing abruptness. His right hand went involuntarily to a pocket of his leather

jacket, the rustling of paper giving reality to his recent hurried movements. And it came to his mind that every tick of his watch might now mark some incident that could materially affect his future course. This thought quickened his step and added keenness to his glance as he went along the street to the livery barn, with the intention of at once arranging for the use of a good saddle horse.

Turning into the wide entrance of the J. D. Watson Livery Barn, he faced a significant group. A tall, showily dressed young fellow held the reins of a restless thoroughbred with one hand while the other rested caressingly on the shoulder of a strikingly pretty blonde girl. The features of his downbent face were concealed by the wide brim of his hat, but Bill caught the trustfulness of the blue eyes and a wistful tremor of the girl's lips as she smiled up at her companion. His words were audible as Bill passed.

"Terribly sorry, Edna, I can't stay over this time," he said, "Got a mighty important piece of business coming up in Indian Creek tomorrow. But I'll be seeing you soon, honey." The smooth, pacifying note in his voice brought a wry twist to Bill's tanned features.

"One of those 'promising' birds," he thought, going on into the office.

When he emerged, both the rider and the girl had vanished. Bill promptly forgot them in the absorption of his personal problems, until that evening. He was sitting on a bench in the tree-shaded square around which the town was built, when the blonde girl passed. His gaze clung to her, noting again the charm of her features and slender, softly rounded figure.

"That's Edna Watson," his companion on the bench explained. "Old J. D's daughter—and as fine a girl as she is pretty. It's a damn shame Van Carter's got his eyes set on her."

"Van Carter?" Bill repeated hastily, his jawline hardening.

"Yep—only son of Lem Carter, over in the Indian Creek country. Van come to one of our dances, got a good look at Edna and swung his loop for her *pronto*. He's the sort that's got a girl in every town within ridin' distance. But when he marries, it'll be somebody with a dad a lot richer than J. D. Watson."

"The Carters have money?" Bill asked, careful to speak casually.

"I'd say they have," was the reply. "What Lem hasn't got by luck he has grabbed by chicanery of some kind. He's about got a strangle holt on his section of the country."

The strong fingers of Bill's right hand closed in a tight grip. His gray eyes had the hard, chill glint of steel. Here was corroboration of his own belief. Had it been folly to return to the neighborhood, of the old Avery ranch to place himself in close contact with the Carters? Could he go ahead quietly with his plans without betrayal of what he had in mind? Perhaps his mother had been right and he should build his life against a new background, far from the scene of memories with their stabbing questions which would require a near miracle to supply answers.

"I'll stay," he vowed silently, "however affairs work out. An Avery was the first settler in the Red Hills, the first white man on Indian Creek. My grandfather laid out the town. We belong here—our roots are deep in the soil. And if there's a clue to what happened that night, I'll find it."

The stores had been open but a few minutes next morning when Bill rode into the little cowtown of Indian Creek, going slowly past well remembered buildings and glimpsing an occasional familiar face. Stopping before a red brick, two-story structure, he glanced up at the windows above the double-front store. One bore in fading letters:

SAMUEL ORDWAY
Attorney-at-Law

Satisfaction in his expression, Bill tied his horse and mounted the sag-

ging stairs at the side of the building. A moment later he opened the first door on the narrow hallway. The man at a rolltop desk glanced up, penetrating hazel eyes appraising his visitor. A gleam kindled in their depths and the hard lines of his mouth relaxed as he exclaimed, "Bill Avery!"

"Right, first guess," Bill said. "Come back to stay."

When the two men had shaken hands, a firm grip, Bill drew a folded newspaper clipping from his pocket, extending it to the lawyer. "Has that place been sold?" he asked.

Ordway's bushy eyebrows drew into a frown as he read the printed lines. "Not yet," he replied, but—"

"Fine!" Bill broke in. "I want you to put through the deal for me. I've kept an eye on things here through the county paper. As soon's I read that old Nate Parks was paralyzed and his wife wanted to sell out quick, it was like a signal to me that now was the time to come back."

"It won't do," Ordway said flatly. "Nate's ranch parallels Lem Carter's south range. Lem's wanted it for years, on account of that big spring. He's got a fifteen-hundred-dollar mortgage on the land and buildings. The bank's already got the cattle. Lem's offered her a thousand dollars cash to cancel the note and turn the place over to him. She'll do it. The note's due this week and not a soul would dare raise Lem's ante."

"I will," Bill stated calmly. "I'll give her three thousand cash, yes, thirty-five hundred if I have to, and she can take up the note."

"You're crazy!" Ordway rasped. "You're the last man who ought to start trouble with Lem Carter."

Bill leaned across the desk to gaze closely into the attorney's eyes. "Why should he have it in especially for me?" he asked. "He got our ranch and we just faded out of the picture. Answer me, Sam—why?"

The lawyer's frown tightened. He looked away, then his eyes turned slowly back to hold Bill's gaze. "I don't know," he replied with undeniable honesty. "But I do know that he hates the very name of Avery. When I was closing up the business for your mother I sensed that he could hardly wait until you folks were out of this country. He's grabbed a lot of land and put over some damned hard deals, but there's never been a pin-point of illegality in one of 'em. And he don't appear to have any personal feeling about any of the others."

"That's because there *was* something crooked about his getting our ranch," Bill said grimly.

"Couldn't have been," Orway objected. "That deal was dead open and shut. I tried damned hard to find a crack in it. Lem held the unpaid notes. And your father's death was pure accident. He was caught by flood water in Wide Wash. His horse was swept away and he was flung on those rocks."

"True," Bill agreed. "But I'll never believe, nor will my mother, that Dad gambled away the money he got for his cattle. I do believe, though, that he rode 'round and paid Carter before he crossed the wash. The notes Lem later showed up were forgeries, made after he knew my father had been killed."

"Two witnesses proved that Jason Avery lost every cent he had on him in that poker game at Spike Dober's Saloon," Ordway said.

"A bartender," Bill scoffed, "and—"

"Tod Bixby, foreman of the X Bar outfit," the lawyer put in.

"Also an ex-convict, I've learned. Bixby did time in the Colorado State pen for forging the name of Lem Carter's brother-in-law on a check. Of course Carter knew this and it gave him a hold on Bixby. Forged notes—Carter gets the ranch *and* the money. See what it adds up to?" Bill asked tensely.

"Guesswork—and dangerous business," Ordway declared seriously. "Digging back seven years is too deep. I advise you—"

"Wait!" Bill exclaimed. "The fel-

low supposed to have won in that game could settle the question."

"A stranger from New England—drifting around for his health, with a pack outfit," Ordway said. "Nobody even knew his name."

"He was a dude and I figure he'd stop in town sometimes," Bill persisted. "I had a hunch to look at the register in Hanover and found that a Philip Wellman of Orchard Beach, Maine, stayed there two nights before the game. Write and see if he's the man we want."

After some further argument, Samuel Ordway agreed to carry out Bill's requests. "But keep your suspicions to yourself," he warned insistently, "and don't start anything with Lem Carter!"

BILL went next to the post office. Two small boys were pummeling each other and scuffling around the lobby. Evading them, he halted near the General Delivery window to wait his turn. Reflections on his recent interview with the lawyer were broken off abruptly when he glimpsed a girl in the corner of the room. . .

She stood with arm uplifted to open the last box in an upper row, and the beautifully modeled contours of her figure and the cameo clearness of her profile were outlined against the white-washed side wall. Her skin was only lightly tanned and there was a lovely rose color in the visible cheek. Dark brown hair as soft and glossy as a bird's wing was gathered into a coil at the nape of her neck. Interest kindled rapidly in Bill's eyes as he watched her deft, graceful movements.

Several letters were thrust into her handbag. One she gazed at for a moment, then a hand flashed to her hair, slender fingers grasepd a pin and slit the envelope. Unfolding the sheet of paper this contained, she remained motionless, oblivious to everything beyond the written lines she was reading. When Bill's turn came he asked vaguely for mail. The girl was moving slowly from the corner now, her attention still on the letter. Suddenly the wrestling boys swung around, striking her violently and flinging her forward, off balance.

Bill caught her before she struck the floor, lifting her to her feet and steadying her with a firm arm. The open letter had slid from her grasp and the handbag had been flung against the wall with a force that opened the catch and scattered the contents.

"Oh—thank you!" she exclaimed in a contralto voice that made Bill feel tingly inside. And he saw that her eyes were a deep blue with those intensely black pupils that have such a look of mystery. "No, I'm not hurt, just surprised," she laughed.

One man hustled the boys from the lobby with a sharp reproof and another gathered up the handbag and spilled articles. Bill stooped for the open letter, and without intention his eye caught the lines:

Martha Darling,
I *must* see you when you come to town Wednesday. Will be at the hotel at noon. If I miss you, will ride out to the ranch. Something quite serious has happened and I—

Bill wrenched his eyes from the letter, his face burning uncomfortably as he handed this to its owner. The clerk was calling attention to the mail he had asked for and he stepped back to the window. When he turned, the girl had vanished.

The incident had filled no more than five minutes, yet he felt as if a long time had elapsed since his entry to the post office. A confusion of impressions and unfamiliar emotions stayed with him as he went slowly along the street. He heard the echo of a voice—a laugh and saw her on the porch of the hotel. Those eyes—how deeply blue and exciting they were! Remembering them gave Bill a sensation of dizziness.

He halted, striving to concentrate on the small happenings about him. But

the teams and horses in the street, the passing pedestrians, had a look of unreality. "Snap out of it!" he commanded himself. "You're having a pipe dream. Remember—some fellow calls that girl 'Martha Darling.' And that's that!"

Grinning wryly, he stepped off at a brisk pace. But the girl in the post office continued to haunt the edges of his mind. And vainly he reminded himself that it was none of his business who had written the letter that brought the blush to her cheek. Probably if he saw her again, his impressions would be quite different. No girl was as remarkable as he remembered this one.

As noon approached he felt an increasing urge towards the hotel. Finally he whirled and strode rapidly in that direction. It was the best place in town to eat, he excused himself, and he was going to take a room there anyhow.

Situated on a corner, a porch extended across the front and down the street side of the building. Wooden chairs stood in a stiff row behind the railing but all were empty of occupants. Only the clerk was in the office where the wall clock assured Bill that it was nearly half past twelve. "Missed her," he thought, with rising irritation that he should feel that decided pang of disappointment.

A hurrying waitress indicated the one empty place in the dining room, a chair at a table near the kitchen door. Bill turned that way, glancing indifferently over the crowd. He had nearly reached the corner when he came to sudden attention. The girl was there—on his left. She was intent on what her companion was saying and did not see Bill.

He paused briefly, sizing up the occupant of the other chair at her table. The back of a longish head covered thickly with chestnut hair, a shirt of heavy amber satin, a belt adorned with wide silver conchas—of what did these remind him? He couldn't decide but he did know, at once, that he resented his presence. Martha was as interesting as he had remembered—more so, Bill concluded, darting a glance that way as he slid into his chair. But what the devil was that bird saying to bring an alarmed look to her face? Now that was softening. She was startled and confused.

"Do you know that fellow in the yellowish shirt?" he asked the waitress who came for his order.

She nodded. "Sure—that's Van Carter," she replied. "And Martha Leeds is with him. I guess they'll be gettin' married soon. She's a smart girl if she gets Van to settle down."

Van Carter! Bill's mind was churning wildly. "Of course—he was wearing that same outfit last night in Hanover, when I saw him with the blonde. So this is the important business he had on today," Bill thought, boiling with anger as he unobtrusively studied Marthat Leeds and considered what he knew of young Carter.

He scarcely noticed when his dinner was set before him and when the sash curtain on the window at his right blew against his cheek, he struck at it with positive savagery. "Wish it was Van's head I punched, the damn sneak! Making up to a girl like that, at the same time he's got that sweet little Watson kid to thinking he's all for her!"

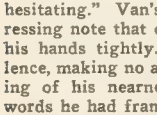
He noticed that Martha ate almost nothing. She appeared worried and excited, her color fluctuating rapidly. When they rose from the table Van slipped a hand through her arm with proprietary assurance. Bill was tremendously pleased at the dignity of her carriage, an aloofness which discounted her companion's manner.

Again Bill's anger boiled high as he recalled the "Martha Darling" in what was likely Van Carter's bold script, and he stabbed furiously at the food on his plate. He was oblivious to footsteps on the porch outside the window until aroused by an unmistakable contralto saying, "It's too dreadfully important, Van, to make such a quick decision. And when Dad feels as he does—"

"He'll take it all right when we're actually married, honey," came in the same smooth voice Bill had heard speaking to Edna Watson the previous day. "And you'll be helping him. It's a bad business, his getting mixed up with Harve Finley, but if we're married, my father will fix things up. As soon as I heard a hint that Ben Leeds might get in a jam, I figured this out. We'll take the afternoon train over to the county seat, get the license, have the knot tied and take a nice little honeymoon over the week-end."

"But Van—I'm not sure," Martha protested.

"Leave all that to me," was the soothing reply. "Just sit here while I run over to the bank, and think how much I love you. It's just because you're such a shy darling that you've been hesitating." Van's voice fell to a caressing note that caused Bill to clench his hands tightly. He had sat in silence, making no attempt to give warning of his nearness. From the first words he had frankly listened.



HEN young Carter's footsteps receded into the distance, for a moment there was no sound from the girl. Then Bill's straining ears caught a long, sighing breath. At the same instant the curtain swung inward, revealing Martha seated tensely on one of the wooden chairs, close to the window.

Impulsively he exclaimed, "Don't do it!"

She turned with a startled ejaculation, her eyes widening with amazement as they met his gaze. Instantly Bill knew the enormity of what he had done. But he was in for it now, nothing to do but go ahead.

"Wait!" he exclaimed, thrusting a hand into his pocket for some coins that he tossed on the table. Then he sprang lightly over the sill and, reaching behind him, drew down the window. She watched him with a baffling expression that made it harder to explain.

"I heard what you and Van Carter were saying," he stated bluntly.

"Yes?" her voice was cold.

"And it—it seemed to me—" He hesitated, wishing she wouldn't look at him so fixedly. What *could* he say, he was thinking frantically. Couldn't tell her Van wasn't any good. "I—hang it, I think it's dreadful for you to be—to be hurried like that. Getting married is too—too serious to rush into it. And—and a girl ought to consider what her father thinks." Bill could feel moisture trickling through his hair, beading his forehead. He had never been in so uncomfortable a spot.

"You don't run a column in the newspaper, do you?" she asked coolly. "Offering advice to brides-to-be?"

Bill felt himself scorching beneath her steady gaze.

"I did sound like a fool," he said honestly. "But please believe me, I'm sure you don't really want to be married like that. You seemed so worried and unhappy, I spoke before I could stop myself."

"Indeed," she murmured, flushing. "But it doesn't concern you."

"Maybe not," Bill said, floundering on with characteristic tenacity, "But please, Mar—Miss Leeds, go home today and think it over."

"What's that?" It was amazing how harshly a smooth voice could speak at times.

Neither Bill nor the girl had been aware of Van Carter's approach. He looked sharply from one to the other. Martha had again assumed the baffling expression.

"We were just discussing a message to my father," she said calmly.

"What was it about your going home?" Van insisted suspiciously, adding as he shot Bill an inimical look, "Who are you? I've seen you some place."

"My name is Bill Avery," was the reply.

"Old Jase Avery's boy!" Van ex-

claimed. "Thought you left this country."

"I did, for a while," Bill said with forced calmness.

"I've got to be going along," Martha said before Carter could speak again. "Coming, Van?" She nodded casually at Bill as the two moved away, Martha obviously hurrying the pace.

Bill gazed after them. "A meddler never done any good," he reflected morosely. "I probably made her plumb set on marrying that coyote. And she the swellest-looking girl, and the smartest, I ever set my two eyes on! Kept her head just as cool as a frosty morning. Didn't give me the least idea what she was thinking—nor him, either. Managed things as slick as one of them magicians that pulls rabbits out of a hat. And do I feel like a dumb rabbit —wow!"

He went slowly to the street but neither Martha nor Van Carter was in sight. He considered going to the railroad station but abandoned that idea. While he was debating the best way to learn if the pair had left town by train, he glimpsed a girl riding into the main road from the side street he knew led to the livery barn. He couldn't be mistaken in the pose of that head and shoulders. That was Martha, heading for home.

"She turned him down!" Bill thought with a wave of that same exhilarating dizziness which had assailed him in the morning after first encountering her in the post office. He wanted to emit a jubilant shout. Then his high spirits were deflated as he reflected that Martha had probably made her decision before he spoke. And very likely she detested him for interfering in a strictly personal affair.

Late that afternoon he dropped into Samuel Ordway's office. The lawyer had just returned from the country and was shaking the dust from his coat when Bill entered.

"I saw Parks and his wife," he said with customary brevity. "They accept your offer of three thousand cash for the ranch. Make out the papers tomorrow."

"Good," Bill returned as briefly. "Who is Harve Finley?"

"Fellow running for sheriff in opposition to Lem Carter's pet."

"Is Finley in any trouble?" Bill asked.

"We-ell," Ordway replied cautiously, "there are rumors. Wouldn't surprise me if he does get into some. Could be framed."

"And who is Ben Leeds?" Bill went on with his questioning.

"Bought the Arrowhead Ranch coupla years ago. Takes sides with Finley."

"Friends with Lem?"

"No. But Carter would like to have Van marry the Leeds girl. The Arrowhead is about the only outfit Carter hasn't been able to dig his claws into—and Martha Leeds is her father's sole heir."

"I see," Bill said thoughtfully. "She's a swell girl."

"She's—" Ordway halted, eyeing Bill suspiciously. "How do you know?"

"And Van Carter is a rat," Bill proceeded, ignoring the question.

"He is," Ordway agreed, "also his father's main interest, after land grabbing and personal power. Lem's kind will lean backwards to keep within the law, until they get in a panic. He could slip a cog if he feared he was going to lose face in the community or if a pet scheme was about to be thwarted. If your suspicions are true, he won't want you around to remind him of that business with your father. And if you—"

"If I should show interest in the girl Van wants to marry," Bill put in coolly, "there might be—er—something in the line of fireworks."

The lawyer shrugged lean shoulders helplessly. "You were the nerviest kid I ever saw and you haven't changed a mite!" was his sole comment.

That night Bill sent a telegram to his former employer that read, "Everythink O.K. Start Ted with the cattle."

The first of the following week he

took possession of the Nate Parks ranch, which meant besides land and buildings a few head of fair saddle stock. His purchase had aroused considerable attention around the country and Ordway declared that Carter had taken it hard, though he was keeping amazingly quiet. Bill had seen neither the Carters nor Martha Leeds.

His second morning on the ranch Bill was repairing a corral gate when a horseman rode into the yard. A compactly built man, his iron grey hair was worn rather long and lay smoothly below his hat. His closely shaven face was devoid of wrinkles and wore a bland expression.

"Good morning, Bill," he said, halting near the corral.

"Howdy, Lem," Bill replied nonchalantly.

"You're lucky, at your age, to have cash enough to buy this place," Carter stated, eyeing Bill closely.

"I worked hard for the stake."

"But you haven't enough more to buy cattle," Lem suggested, adding when Bill said nothing, "and you either hope to raise some, possibly at the bank, or knowing my interest in this ranch, you figured on tricking a still higher price out of me. All right—we'll settle the matter now. I'm expanding considerably and can use this range and water. I'll give you five hundred dollars more than you paid."

"My reasons for buying are personal," Bill replied, staring into the black eyes that belied the blandness of the face. "This ranch positively is not for sale. I'm here to stay."

"I've made my only offer," Carter said curtly. "If your buy was on the level, well—I hate to see a young fellow start off with the handicap this unstocked place will be. And knowing how unfortunate your father was—"

"Unfortunate is hardly the word I would use for what happened to my father," Bill broke in, making a strong effort to conceal rising anger. He had not foreseen how difficult it would be to face Carter and restrain his suspicions.

When Lem rode off, after a few carefully casual words, Bill was tensely on edge. "There must be some way of bringing this business to a head," he thought. "Never could play a waiting game. Rather risk everything on the cards I hold."

AT THE end of the week cattle were on Bill's range and he had the companionship of a cowboy he had ridden with for several years. Leaving Ted Rising in charge, Bill rode to town. He wanted to see Ordway and there was to be a horse sale that afternoon. About a mile out of Indian Creek he saw a girl rider in front of him. One look and he jabbed spurs into his horse. When he slowed at her side, Martha gave him a serene glance and nod. But the air held the disturbance of an electric current and he could not think of any ordinary comment to make.

It seemed that she was similarly affected, for after a moment she startled Bill by asking bluntly, "Why were you so determined to stop me from going away with Van Carter that day?"

"W-why, I—I told you the reasons," he stammered.

"Those you stated were not sufficient to account for your extreme insistence," she told him. "And since you interfered so inexcusably in my personal affairs, I consider you owe me at least an explanation."

She was looking squarely at him, the intense color of her eyes adding to the disturbing mystery of their depths. As before in her presence, Bill lost all power to think.

"I had to try to stop you," he exclaimed, "because I wanted to marry you myself!"

"Oh!" The ejaculation was a gasp. Martha's serenity vanished and she blushed to the wave of soft hair below

her hat. "We're not even acquainted," she said hastily.

"Didn't need to be," he assured her. "The minute I saw you in the post office that morning, I let go all holds. But those things I told you were all true," he went on, "as far as they went. There's no use, Martha, I can't talk to you even a minute and try to hide what I think about you. And I'll fight to the last second, to keep you from marrying Van Carter—or anybody else!"

The flush was subsiding, but she evaded his eyes. "Thanks for the honest reply," she said, attempting lightness. "And you are excused from further explanations."

They were entering town, and to Bill's dismay, before he could say anything further, they had turned into the main street and met Van face to face. With a scowling glance at Bill, he wheeled in beside Martha.

"Lucky break," he said. "We'll put up the horses and go over—"

"Sorry, but I've got to go right on and meet Dad," she said coolly. "See you some other time."

"But Martha—" Van began.

"Look!" she exclaimed. "Someone's waving at you."

Bill glanced at the sidewalk where an unusual number of people were grouped, evidently attracted to town by the sale. Edna Watson, wearing an attractive riding outfit, was standing at the side of the man from whom Bill had rented the horse at the Hanover barn. The man had followed her eager glance and was scowling openly at Van Carter.

"J. D. Watson, Edna's father," Bill thought, relishing Van's chagrin but sorry for the girl whose eyes held such trust in him. Then Martha was urging her horse ahead and he heard her softly utter, " 'By, Bill." The next minute a team and wagon came between them and Van had dropped back.

Ordway greeted Bill with unusual eagerness.

"Heard from Wellman," he said, producing a letter from his desk.

Bill read the main paragraph aloud:

> "'I do recall the game, because after the first round I lost steadily to the cattleman. Especially remember because I rode from town with him next morning to a tall red pinnacle rock where he turned off, to pay a mortgage in full, he told me. What he had won made it possible, for he had only meant to take up half. Always considered that a happy loss.'

"Guess that about settles it," Bill said with deep gravity. "Only one red rock like that along any of the roads and it's where the trail heads off for Carter's outfit."

"A long way from bringing home anything to him, I'm afraid," Ordway declared dubiously.

"No," Bill said, with quick decision. "The sale is about to start. There's a gang gathered there. I'm going to come right out in the open."

"Wait!" Ordway shouted vainly as Bill dashed from the room and down the stairway into the street. The lawyer followed as fast as he could, but by the time he had reached the open lot near the hotel, Bill was on the auctioneer's block and had the attention of the crowd.

"Many of you were my father's friends," he said in a clear, carrying voice, "some were our neighbors. I know you will be glad, with me, that I can now prove that he did not gamble away the money which would keep us from dispossession." The letter was read aloud, accompanied by an explanation of its source.

"What about them fellows saying Jase Avery lost his wad?" a voice demanded from the crowd.

"They were mistaken—or they had reason to make false statements," Bill replied, every syllable audible to the farthest pair of ears. "All of you know that Spike Dober's bartender left this country ahead of a sheriff's posse. A few dollars could have bought his testimony. And Sam Ordway holds records that prove Tod Bixby served time in the pen for forging a check—with the name of Lem Carter's brother-in-law.

You knew that, Lem?" This question shot straight at the white face of the man addressed. "Anybody with a hold on Bixby could have given him orders to do or to say anything." Bill's steady gaze held the eyes of the crowd.

He saw Van, partly concealed by two broad-shouldered old cattlemen near the fringe of the onlookers. And Bill caught the gleam of savage fury in Van's eyes as somebody demanded of Bill, "What you trying to prove, young fellow?"

"The truth. You've all heard me and can do your own thinking," Bill replied, adding, "Only one more word. My father's coat was torn off and lost in the flood. Anything in the nature of a receipt—or a canceled note—would have been lost!"

"Damn you!" The frenzied shout was followed by a sharp explosion. A bullet struck the post behind Bill's head as he ducked and catapulted himself through the jam of men.

"Van shot!" came a yell. "It was Van!"

Young Carter pulled trigger for a second time, his face distorted to a mask of fury. Men sprang back as Bill flung himself towards Van, stooping low, then coming up in a terrific lunge, hard fist striking Carter on the chin while his other hand gripped the wrist above the forty-five. Van fought with the unleashed fury of insanity, Bill with the deadly purpose of a man who knows exactly what he is doing. The impact of flesh on flesh, the explosion of gunfire were followed by a cracking of bone as Van's crushed wrist drooped and the forty-five fell to the ground.

Sam Ordway was shouting and the cold, hard tones of the sheriff rang above the tumult. "Get him, boys!" that officer ordered. "Lem, too!" His tall, sinewy figure strode toward the elder Carter, who stood as if frozen to the ground. "Guess we don't need much more proof of the truth, after Van's break."

It was some time before Bill could extricate himself from the crowd. The tide of feeling against the Carters surged higher and higher. Van's broken words as he was led off to the jail were an even more complete betrayal of Carter guilt, and there were a dozen witnesses to attest to his attempt to shoot Bill.

Bill turned into a side street and walked slowly along, trying to quiet his excitement and sort his thoughts. Quick, light steps behind him were unheeded until a soft call stopped him.

"Bill—wait!"

Martha came quickly to his side. She caught his arm with both hands and looked up into his face. "You were splendid!" she exclaimed. "You should hear what people are saying!"

The seriousness of Bill's face yielded to a smile. "Poker is a great game," he said. "But let's forget that now. I'm a lot more interested in what you think of my reason for taking a hand in *your* affairs."

Dark eyelashes veiled her eyes. "We-ell," she said slowly. "I might say I found it very interesting."

Then Bill kissed her. "Couldn't have managed that if you had been looking at me," he whispered. "Your eyes are too dazzling. And now let's go some place and talk things over. How about getting our horses and riding out to your place? We'll be all set to break the news to your father when he comes home."

"Oh!" Martha murmured, blushing deeply. "He's there now. I only said that to get rid of Van."

IN THE NEXT ISSUE

**Buckaroo Bounce**

**By S. OMAR BARKER**

# Man From Blue River

## By Marian O'Hearn

***Sometimes it really does happen—a man and girl look at each other and know that this moment is what they've always waited for. And if the girl is engaged to another man, what then?***

I

THE main street of Lawrence was so crowded that the passing streams of people jostled each other and strangers walked shoulder to shoulder. The air was charged with carnival, but some of the faces in the crowd made Faith Byers afraid. They were faces which belonged, not to the range, but to the back streets of cities. Pasty jowls and watchful, furtive eyes.

What would happen when her father, who had mounted the steps of the newest and biggest saloon, tried to talk to them? She glanced at his slight figure and serene old face and ran up the steps to his side. "Dad, it's not dignified for you to preach here. A minister doesn't talk on the public streets!"

Anthony Byers looked at her with gentle reproof. "I've explained, Faith. People in this town won't come to church, so I must go to them. It's my duty."



"But—"

"Please!" And lifting his voice, he called to the men and women on the sidewalk: "You must see the truth—all of you! This can be the greatest country in the world. There is wealth at your feet and freedom if you want it! But what's happening? Corrupt

politicians rule the land, not honest men. You fight over whether there shall be Territorial law or State government, but which of the two factions is honorable? Do you ask that?"

"Aw, quiet down!" A raucous voice bellowed. "Shut him up, boys, let's dunk him in a barrel of beer!"

Half a dozen men wheeled out of the crowd, and Faith stepped in front of her father. "He has a right to speak," she told them angrily. "You don't have to listen, but you can't stop him."

Confronted by the slim, dark-haired girl, they paused sheepishly, but a woman at the rear of the crowd shrilled: "This town doesn't want any Holy Joes. Go get him!"

Once more the rush started and Faith's lips went white. She darted forward to meet the threatening men, crying: "Let him alone. If you hurt him—"

"We won't hurt him, we'll just give him a little lesson."

"Not this time, brother." The words rang through the uproar like the snap of a pistol hammer, and a pony charged straight up the steps, sending men leaping out of the way. At the top the horseman wheeled, widely, and crowded the last of the mob away from the elderly minister.

"Move back into the street," the rider said, and as he dropped to the ground, the guns lifted from his holsters into his hands.

The crowd hesitated, and there were a few indistinct, sullen shouts. But then people began to move again, twin streams flowing past the saloon steps.

The man slid his guns into the holsters at his thighs and grinned, his glance moving over Faith. "They won't come back for a while," he said. "But maybe you'd better give up the speech-making."

He was big and his faded clothes were covered with dust. His skin was darkened by wind and sun into an almost coppery brown. But his hair was fair enough to catch the light and there was youngness on his face.

Anthony Byers said, calmly: "I have to make speeches. Thank you for your help, but these are my people and they must listen to me."

The gray eyes narrowed until they were as thin as the edge of minted coins. "You'd better not. This town's kind of rough."

"It's not only rough, it's depraved. There's no sense in staying in my church and preaching to empty pews. People need me and I have to go where they can hear me."

"If they're that stubborn, why bother with them? Let 'em look after themselves."

"You're right," Faith broke in. "But Dad thinks they don't know what they're doing. He wants them to develop this country instead of letting political bosses rob them while they carouse."

His eyes touched hers, held them. Their clear hardness was like a shock. But then the metallic quality disappeared. Or she imagined that it had; imagined a boy's warm gaze was answering hers. He said in a tone which she was to always remember: "My name's Pat Ransome, ma'am. I'm a stranger here; just got down from my place way up in the Blue River country.

Before Faith could answer, her father put out his hand. "I'm Anthony Byers and this is my daughter. If you can't find a place to stay, our home is open to you. Lawrence is so crowded you may need a bed."

"Thank you, sir." Ransome hesitated over the words and his gaze went back to the girl. "I'll probably stay at the Great Western Hotel. Meeting a friend of mine." He paused, and then added: "Maybe you know him—Tom Knox? He's been in Lawrence for some years."

Faith's blue eyes sharpened against his face and she told herself: "Of course, he would be a friend of Knox's. He would have to be." But there was a sharp, almost stunned second of loss. As if something precious had been torn

from her hands just as she tried to grasp it.

Her father straightened and his face chilled. "We've met Mr. Knox. Good day." And taking Faith's arm, he started hurriedly down the steps.

"Wait a minute, ma'am." Ransome's voice was low and his hand lifted, as if to touch her. It dropped at once, but she remembered that too. Remembered the shape and strength of his lifted hand. "Maybe you'd better tell me how Tom Knox stands with you. I'd guess you don't care much for him."

Faith did not want to meet his eyes, but her glance, lifting against her will, was caught by his; caught in a command which was like hands holding her.

Her father said: "We know very little of him and couldn't tell you anything important. Good day, young man."

Ransome stepped back so that they could pass, but Faith knew that his gaze was following her and, at the bottom of the steps, she glanced back. He was standing motionless, looking after them, and his eyes were like new-minted coins.

Anthony Byers murmured: "I'm sorry he's one of Knox's pals. We'll forget about it."

"Yes." But she was wondering at her feeling of loss. That man, Pat Ransome, had been like an answer for which she was waiting.

## II

ALL of the Territory knew about Knox, who had fought his way up through dishonest petty politics to ruthless power. He had been involved in every kind of land and mining graft. And, when accused, laughingly admitted the facts, insisting that everyone in the country was trying to do the same thing. So strongly entrenched that not even an open admission of guilt could harm him, he controlled the local government by filling every public office with his hirelings. He received revenue from every bar, gambling hall and dive in Lawrence.

"Still," the girl said suddenly, "If Ransome's a stranger here—"

The roar of a gun cut through her words, and even as she whirled, people were running for cover. The gun barked again and the street was empty—except for Pat Ransome. His weapons had flipped, in that swift, deadly dance, into his hands, and there was a dark blotch on the sleeve of his shirt. He had been shot.

Blood dripped from his hand, but he was facing a side street which met the main thoroughfare directly in front of the saloon, and his guns were leveling, carefully. Faith saw the other man, then. He was clinging to the shelter of a wall as he slid away. Both Ransome's weapons spoke and the man went down, still pressing against the brown brick wall.

Ransome waited, erect and motionless, the last of the sunlight raying over his fair head. And Faith's breath caught in her dry mouth and she told herself: "His eyes look like that again—like the edges of a coin."

He stirred finally and walked toward the mound which had been a man. The movement aroused Anthony Byers from his shock and he ran across the street. Faith followed and when she reached them, her father was kneeling beside the still figure. Ransome was staring down at the dead man and his face was almost calm.

"You've—killed him!" she said, because she had to say something; had to break the terrible stillness.

He looked at her, but his eyes did not see her. "Yeah. He would have killed me if I hadn't."

She was silent and his glance flicked, oddly, over her face. "I'll tell the sheriff about it," he said. "Sorry you had to be here."

As he turned away, a man with a small bag in his hand crossed the street and said, matter-of-factly, "Better let me look at your arm. Gunshot wounds can cause trouble." It was Mike Har-

vey, one of the two physicians in Lawrence.

"Thanks, but not now. I'll see you later. It's not bad." And Ransome went on at that swift, even pace.

Harvey swung around and, seeing Faith, started angrily toward her. "What's the idea of standing out in the street with a shooting match going on?"

"It was over before I knew it had happened," she said, and her glance followed Pat Ransome.

The young doctor shifted his bag and pulled her arm through his. He glared at her father. "She might have been killed! Why didn't you get her out of the way?"

Anthony Byers smiled. "I've never managed to make her accept orders. That's why I don't try to give 'em."

"You'd both better go home," Harvey snapped. "We'll take this carriage at the corner."

He helped Faith and her father up and, sitting at the girl's side, looked at her grimly. "I thought you promised not to have any part in this street preaching."

"Promised?" Her blue glance lifted to his face. "I don't think I said anything, Mike! You just told me."

"But you knew I took it for granted."

Anthony Byers laughed drily. "Which shows that doctors know less about women than ministers! Never take anything concerning them for granted."

Faith smiled at Harvey. She had known him for almost two years, ever since she and her father arrived in Lawrence, and she knew that some day, when she was really ready, she would marry him. He was everything she wanted in a husband. Good-looking, capable and hard-working. Until she met him she had not known that a man could be so gentle and yet completely strong.

He touched her hand. "Make the promise now—then I'll only worry about you part of the time."

"But I can't let Dad go out alone, he might be killed! Today—" But she stopped, suddenly not wanting to tell Mike about Pat Ransome.

"What happened today?"

Anthony Byers spoke quickly. "I started to talk in front of the Oasis Bar and some toughs threatened me. A young fellow—probably a gunnie himself—stopped them. Someone shot him a minute after we left."

"The man who wouldn't let me take care of his arm!" Harvey's voice was startled and his hazel glance touched Faith. "He didn't look like a gunnie to me."

Fire beat up into the girl's cheeks and her blue eyes darkened. "He must be, he's a friend of Tom Knox."

Harvey's glance, still on her face, became intent, and her hand lifted to her throat where an angry pulse was beating against the flesh. But he did not speak until they reached the parsonage, where he said: "I think we'd better have a talk."

The color in her cheeks became even more fiercely bright. "Mike, Pat Ransome's a stranger in Lawrence, yet someone tried to shoot him. Why would anyone want to kill a stranger?"

"There might be reasons. I heard that Tom Knox was bringing in a man to run for the legislature. The nomination's all set and Knox's friends always win the elections."

"Oh!" The glow in her face faded and once more she knew that sense of loss. "Would the State party resort to murder?"

"Might not have been the State party—just someone who didn't want Knox's man to be nominated. He's always careful about the people he brings in to run for office. They're invariably strangers with clean records, at least as far as anyone in the Territory knows. That's playing it safe."

"A clean record," she murmured. "Have you ever seen a freshly minted coin? That's what—"

"Faith!" Harvey's hand closed on her arm and he drew her toward the house. "I don't give a damn about this

man Ransome. I want to talk about us. Your father's gone inside, so we'll sit on the porch."

He put her onto the porch couch and sat beside her. "This latest idea of preaching sermons on the street is crazy. I can't keep my mind on my work because I'm always wondering if you're in trouble."

"But you know—"

"Let me finish." He took her hands in his firm, strong ones. "Why don't you marry me so I can really look after you? This isn't a woman's country and girls like you can get hurt."

Faith went very still. So still that even her breath paused. Mike was asking her to marry him, just as she had dreamed. He was waiting, so close that she could see the line of his mouth and the healthy grain of his skin. For months she had thought of this moment, but now that it had come, something was missing; something which had to be between them. "Is that the only reason why you want to marry me? So you can look after me?"

His head lifted and his eyes grew sharp. "Well," he murmured. "You can play the coquette, too! I didn't believe it."

She flushed and stopped searching for the magic the moment should have had. "Perhaps every woman can—at times," she said, and thought of Pat Ransome with his narrowed, searching eyes. Would he ask a girl to marry him so that he might look after her? Or would it be only because he couldn't live without her?

"Sorry, darling," Mike murmured. "I shouldn't have said that. I can make pretty speeches, too."

"Then make some."

"No, there are better ways." And his head bent over hers. He claimed her lips with the tenderness which was part of him. A tenderness that was inescapable and yet could never be softness.

But when he released her there were stinging tears in her eyes. What Mike, whom she had hoped to marry, was offering wasn't enough. She was seeing Pat Ransome's face, remembering him as he had stood in the light, looking after her. He had come to Lawrence so that Knox's thievery and graft could control another public office—yet he was making her forget the touch of Mike's lips!

"Faith," Harvey said softly, "I'm leaving. Guess I muffed things this time."

"No—wait." She got up and her hands clung to him. "You didn't muff anything."

He put his fingers under her chin and tilted her face up to his. "Sure?" he asked, huskily. "You've got to be sure."

Instead of answering, she lifted her mouth and, a moment later, whispered: "No one could ever find a better husband than you'll be."

He laughed and pushed her gently away from him. "Hold that theory, lady. Just now I've got work to do. By the time I get back there'll probably be a few more gunshot cases."

## III

FAITH was finishing the supper dishes when she heard her father leave his study and go softly along the hall to the front door. She raced out of the kitchen, calling: "Where are you going?"

"To make this town listen to me. You didn't think I'd give up?"

"Please don't! You'll be hurt."

"That's not important."

Realizing that she could not stop him, she turned swiftly toward her own room, saying: "Then I'll go with you as soon as I get a wrap."

He nodded absently and waited for her to join him for the short walk to the business district. But as they approached the Great Western Hotel, they were almost forced off the sidewalk by the surging, reckless crowd. "Looks as if Tom Knox is holding open house," Byers said, grimly. "I suppose

his political gang is in town to look over the nominee. The boys have great times on the taxpayer's money."

The space in front of the hotel was almost impassable, for hundreds of men had wedged themselves into the street to stare at the office holders. As Faith and her father neared the doors, the crowd thrust back to make an opening for a group of men emerging from the hotel. They were shouting with laughter and one of them, pausing on the steps, called to the crowd: "You know old Judge Foster, boys? Well, we just found out he tried to kiss one of the hotel chambermaids this morning. We're giving him a trial by kangaroo court. All we need is the accusing witness."

"Won't find any witnesses this time of the night!" someone shouted back. "The women in this town stay inside after dark!"

The merry roisterer on the steps of the hotel made a large gesture. "Find someone. Got to be girls around." He paused, stared down at Faith, and then roared: "There's one! Bring her in. She can accuse the judge. Make it good, girlie, make it hot! He'll have a time tonight."

The politicians' companions charged down the steps and Faith's father pushed her behind him. "Are you all crazy?" he demanded. "Not even Tom Knox's hired men would do this."

"Ah, get out of the way. We're not going to harm her." One of them swept the girl off her feet, and when Anthony Byers tried to stop him shoved the old minister back against the crowd.

Faith tried to twist free and, failing, struck wildly at the man's face. But he changed his grip so as to hold down her arms and continued, with much laughter, up into the lobby.

There was a roar of amusement as he staggered across the lobby carrying the struggling girl and someone pushed open the doors to the main floor banquet room.

"Here's our witness!" He set her down in a room thick with smoke and filled with half-drunken men. "Get the trial going, gentlemen! We'll see whether Judge Foster can insult the womanhood of Lawrence."

Faith put her hands on the back of a chair to steady herself and drew a long, careful breath. Somehow, she would hold back the blazing anger which made her want to strike out at the men around her.

The man at the head of the table was a big, once-powerful figure with an old young face. His jaw was soft with wadded fat and too much flesh drooped down over his small dark eyes. Tom Knox, the political boss of Lawrence, who was said to steal a million dollars a year from the taxpayers and make them like it, was grinning with delight as he gestured toward Faith with a cigar held between pudgy fingers.

Someone was ploughing toward him —and then Faith saw that it was Pat Ransome. His eyes were like no color she had ever seen and his coppery bronze skin was white. The long narrow banquet table was directly in front of him and he leaped over it as he made for the girl's captor. She heard the ugly thud of flesh against bone as his fists struck and a man roared: "For God's sake, Pat, stop! Stop!"

Ransome's hands were on the other's throat and his face was that of a savage. The sight of him sent a sick horror surging through the girl, but to her own surprise she ran toward him. "You'd better let him go," she said, and her high, thin words cut through the din. "You're one of Tom Knox's paid politicians too, these are your own kind."

His eyes lifted and color began to creep back into his face. He released the feebly struggling man and let him fall to the floor.

"Where's your father?" he asked through stiff, barely moving lips.

"Outside." She was already running for the door. "They may have killed him by this time."

The crowd in front of the hotel broke apart and she saw a group of men gath-

ered around something on the walk. "Dad!" she cried.

Anthony Byers' face was bloodless and his body seemed curiously crumpled. But before she could touch him, Pat Ransome lifted her to her feet.

"I'll look after him. He's probably just knocked out." He swung around to the nearest man. "Get a doctor—fast. There's one named Harvey down the street. Tell him we're taking Mr. Byers home."

He lifted the minister's slight body and opened the door of a carriage which had drawn up to the curb. Placing the old man carefully on the back seat, he said: "He's not badly hurt. He'll be all right."

"You're not leaving now?"

The odd gray glance flickered. "No," he said softly. "I'm taking you home. The doctor ought to be there almost as soon as we are."

The doctor was Mike. Faith, with her father's head pillowed in her lap, wondered why she could not call up a picture of his face. If she could visualize the strength of his mouth and the kindness of his eyes, she would remember other things, too.

The carriage crawled to a halt in front of the house and Ransome carried the minister in. She hurried ahead to show him the way and the door-knocker banged.

"Faith!" Mike Harvey's voice came from the hall.

"In here. It's Dad."

She started out to him only to stop and look up at the man at her side. Something moved in his eyes, but instead of speaking, he turned out of the room, and when she followed he and Mike Harvey were facing each other, silently.

"Hurry," she cried. "Dad was knocked down and hurt."

Mike walked into the bedroom. "I'll want your help, Faith." His tones were cool and clipped, his eyes impersonal.

As he bent over her father she said nervously: "Pat Ransome was there at the hotel when we—"

"Not now," Mike interrupted. "You can tell me about it later."

Her head jerked up and her eyes widened against his face. But he was not looking at her. Nor was he aware of her.

"Why is he unconscious so long?" she whispered.

"Shock. I'll bring him out of it, but he'll have to stay in bed for a few days." He pulled the pillow from under Anthony Byers' head and took a phial from his bag. As he held it to the minister's lips he said: "You can go out now. I'll undress him."

Once more Faith's eyes widened as she looked at the young physician. Was this the answer? Was the magic missing from his caresses because no woman could ever have all of him? He was a stranger now. A cool, detached stranger conscious only of the doctor's eternal struggle with life and death. "What of it?" she asked herself angrily. "Even part of him is enough—and maybe no man ever gives all of himself."

## IV

RANSOME was waiting in the hall, standing straight and erect and still. Just as he had stood while her father prayed beside the man he had shot. "How is he?"

"Still unconscious, but the doctor says he'll be all right. He's suffering from shock."

He nodded and was silent, as if waiting for her to go on. When she did not speak he said, "There's something I'd like to tell you, but we'd better not talk here."

"Why—" But her words stopped and she moved uneasily past him, to the living room.

He came in slowly, his gray glance knifing over the room, taking in everything in it. When she sat down, he pulled a chair directly before her.

"I want to explain about Tom Knox,"

he said. "I knew him a long time ago when we were kids in Texas. I worked for the same outfit and we covered a lot of trails together. He left years ago, and I didn't know where he was when I came to the Territory to start a spread in the Blue River Country.

"A week ago an hombre showed up at my Spade ranch and said Tom needed me here in Lawrence. I came—because I'd have expected him to come if I'd sent for him. But I wasn't ready for what I found. Knox isn't the man I used to know. He doesn't even look the same. After I get him straightened out on what his gang pulled tonight, I'm heading back to the Blue River country."

His coppery bronzed face was almost tense, but his gaze was that of a boy. Young and warm. Or perhaps she was imagining that, because his eyes seemed to command her, to say disturbing, soundless words.

"Then you've probably found out what Tom Knox means to Lawrence. He and his crowd are turning it into the most corrupt, dishonest town in the West."

The thin look about his mouth became more marked. "If the people of the Territory wanted honest government, they'd force the politicians to give it to them. So I'm not worried about that."

"Then why did you want me to know about your friendship with Knox?"

The light which had made his eyes young suddenly flared high. "Because you're you. When I go back to the Blue River country, I want you to go with me."

Color raced up her throat and receded so swiftly that her face was paper white. She started to her feet, then sat down again, almost helplessly. He had held her as much as if he had put his hands on her.

"I don't know what you mean," she said, the words almost whispering through her dry lips. "I don't know you. We only saw each other a little while ago!"

"We've always known each other. At least, I've always known you. Maybe I've been waiting for you. I've heard it happened that way but I didn't believe it until now. Faith!" He was bending over her and the light which had moved in his eyes was also glowing behind the flesh of his face.

She shook her head, trying to find words to stop him, struggling to say that he must not touch her. But his hands were already on her, drawing her toward him, and his mouth was crushing down on hers. She could never remember all of that kiss, which stretched over an endless second. She only knew that his lips sent a savage song into her blood. A wild rhythm which was hard as his eyes and his arms.

She had hunted for an elusive magic with Mike Harvey and had not found it. Was this that magic? No. It was wilder and deeper. Something she could never forget nor escape now that she had known it. His arms loosened and she felt him straighten. He lifted his head and looked toward the door. There was someone there . . . Mike Harvey.

She turned unsteadily, and felt Pat's quick, supporting hand on her arm. She did not speak, but she and Mike looked at each other across the length of the room.

Finally, he made an odd gesture and put his bag down on a table. "Maybe," he said, and his voice sounded weary, "I'd better talk to you alone, Ransome."

Pat's hand left Faith's arm and she heard him say: "You can talk to me any time—but is there any special reason to do it now?"

I'm afraid there is. Miss Byers is my fiancée."

Ransome did not speak and Faith, facing Mike, wondered how many minutes were dragging by in a stillness which grew sharper than a scream. She wet her dry lips and put her hand against the hard pulse in her throat before she was able to turn. His eyes

looked down at her almost calmly, and they were the gray of minted coin. Then his glance went back to Harvey.

"Seems to have been a misunderstanding, Doc. You needn't bother to do any talking. It's all said. *Adios.* And good night to you, ma'am."

He walked past her to the door, moving evenly and surely. His face seemed darker than ever and his hair more brilliantly fair. "Pat!" The word burst from her lips. "Where are you going?"

He paused and looked back. "To see about getting nominated to the Territorial legislature."

Faith listened to Pat Ransome's footsteps going down the hall; heard the closing of the front door. Only then did she turn back to Mike Harvey, and he said quickly: "Your father's conscious, but I want him to sleep."

"Thank you." She sat down and waited as he crossed the room to her.

"You shouldn't have done that," he said quietly. "He's not a man to play with, and I don't think he's the kind who plays himself."

"Maybe I don't understand."

Mike smiled wryly. "It's simple enough. And don't look like that. I guess I knew, this afternoon, that you weren't for me."

She made herself meet his eyes. "What are you telling me?"

"Just that our engagement's ended."

His face no longer looked drawn, but there was a new crookedness at the corners of his mouth.

"Would you let me go like this? So easily? Mike, listen to me. Pat Ransome's a stranger. I don't know why I kissed him or why I wanted to. But it's over now and it has nothing to do with us, with what we might have."

The crooked grin deepened. "I'm afraid it has a lot to do with us. I wouldn't have told Ransome you'd promised to marry me, except that he isn't for you, either. He's not your kind and you wouldn't like being married to one of Tom Knox's hired hands. They're worse than professional gunmen because a gunnie can only ruin a few lives — they destroy thousands."

"That means you decided then, as soon as you saw us together—"

"I decided you shouldn't be engaged to anyone until you've grown up." He took his bag from the table. "I'll be around in the morning."

"Mike, wait." She went to him quickly, her hands lifting in appeal. "I wish it hadn't happened. You have to believe that. Please kiss me good night, so that I'll know—"

"So you'll know I still want to hold you in my arms?"

She stopped and stared at him with darkening eyes. "Is that what you think of me?"

He turned to the door. "Good night, Faith," he said crisply, and he too moved quietly down the hall and out of the house.

It was a long time before she went to her own room and got into bed, knowing she would not sleep. The darkness was a curtain on which played vivid pictures of Pat Ransome. And it also showed her Mike Harvey smiling drily to hide the tenderness of his mouth.

AT DAWN she got up, and pulling on her clothes, went to her father's room. Finding him asleep, she started a fire in the kitchen range and began to prepare breakfast. The sun would be up soon and Pat Ransome would be moving about in the sunlight, apart from her and out of her life. As she measured coffee into the pot there was a sound like a soft footstep on the back porch. She listened, the spoon in mid-air. Had she actually heard the door opening? It couldn't be!

But it was. It swung in slowly and a man stepped into the kitchen. Tom Knox, the political boss of Lawrence. He looked at her with his appraising, heavy-lidded dark eyes and said: "Good morning, ma'am. I saw a light and figured you were awake. How's your father? I heard he was roughed up a bit last night."

"Yes. Your men did the roughing."

"I'm sorry about that, and the boys'll pay for it, too. Mind if I sit down?"

He pulled out a kitchen chair, as much at ease as if before dawn calls were a frequent occurrence. "Heard Pat Ransome was here last night, that he brought your father home after he was hurt."

Faith was silent, watching his unnaturally heavy face, with the folds of soft flesh beneath a chin which should have been hard.

"Ransome got plenty excited when that crazy fool dragged you in off the street as a witness in his kangeroo court. The man didn't mean any real harm and it wouldn't have happened if he hadn't been drunk."

"That didn't make it any pleasanter."

"Still, I'd hate to think it would cause serious trouble for Ransome."

"How could it cause trouble for him?"

Knox shrugged his thick shoulders. "He seems to have gotten ideas. Maybe he got them after talking to you. Late last night he showed up in front of the Great Western Hotel and made a wild-eyed speech. Wanted the people of Lawrence to drive me out of the Territory." Knox paused and chuckled softly. "And I brought him here! Anyhow, he told the crowd that he was going to run for the nomination—independently. Independently! That's funny, isn't it, ma'am? As if anybody could get elected like that in this country."

The thickly enfolded eyes were unsmiling and watchful. But Faith was no longer seeing them. Pat Ransome hadn't become a political puppet! Instead, he was going to fight Knox! If he could get the people behind him. . . .

"Too bad," Knox broke in and his voice held that thick laughter. "It wouldn't work. Just couldn't, ma'am. Suppose the people of this district were crazy enough to line up behind a man without any political connections. What'd happen?"

"Maybe there would be honest government!"

"Depends on how you look at those things. But if Ransome got too many people on his side, it wouldn't be nice—because he wouldn't live long."

The slow, casual words sent ice into the girl's veins. And the man's dark eyes told her that he meant exactly what he had said. Ransome had been his friend, but he would die if he tried to stand in Knox's way.

She stepped back, uncomfortably. "Why are you telling me this? Maybe you ought to tell Pat Ransome."

"I'll do that, too, but he's a stubborn hombre. Thought maybe you could make him listen."

"Why? I never saw him until yesterday and I don't expect to see him again."

"No?" Knox murmured. "That's too bad. He acted pretty interested, but maybe he doesn't know about young Doc Harvey."

He got up and started for the door, letting his words trail after him. But with his hand on the knob, he went on: "Ransome's an explosive jasper. You saw that last night. He would have killed someone if he hadn't been stopped. Might not be safe for the doc if Pat found out."

"Wait a minute, Mr. Knox. I don't like what you've said and you had no right to come here. Don't do it again!"

"I won't, ma'am. But remember about Ransome. He plays for keeps."

The door snapped closed but she heard him chuckle as he went down the steps.

## V

WHEN Faith took a breakfast tray into her father's room at eight o'clock, she was dressed for the street, and the sick man smiled. "I like that outfit," he murmured, "but isn't it a bit fancy for doing housework?"

"I'm going out if you're well enough to be alone for a while."

"Of course I'm well enough. Can't you wait for young Harvey to get here? It's still early."

Faith attempted to smile, but her lips twisted and she turned away. "I'm not going to see Mike. Dad—" she glanced at her reflection in the mirror—"do you really like this dress?"

"Of course."

But she did not hear him, for she was trying to see herself through a man's eyes; through Pat Ransome's eyes. The dove-gray frock hugged her slim waist and the full, graceful skirt was so long that only the tips of her slippers showed. A spray of rose-pink plume dipped over the side of the matching gray bonnet and rested against her black curls. She was glad that her hair was so dark because it made her skin seem very fair. Her eyes were good, too. Deep blue and just large enough. . . .

"Faith, stop mooning! I hate to see a girl admire herself!"

"I wasn't—that is, I'm not sure about this dress. Now I'm going to leave you for a few minutes. Mike will be in later."

She hurried out in the warm sunlight and started for the Great Western Hotel, through streets as crowded as they had been the night before. But today the mood of the crowd was different. Groups of men and women talked in undertones and others moved quietly toward the main thoroughfare, which was lined with hastily made banners.

The largest banner fluttered over a building opposite the Great Western Hotel where workmen were erecting a platform. The breeze caught the home-made pennant and shook it out in front of the girl's eyes. "Clean up Lawrence!" it read. "Nominate Pat Ransome!"

Dozens of other signs shrieked: "Tom Knox's machine is through." "Pat Ransome will represent the people, not the office holders."

Warmth stirred through Faith. It was really happening. He was actually defying Knox, and apparently the people of Lawrence were determined to support him!

The lobby of the Great Western was almost empty and the clerk said: "Mr. Ransome's no longer here. You'll find him across the street in that building where they're putting up the stand."

As she reached the entrance of the shabby office building, Pat appeared in the doorway.

"I saw you coming," he said. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Ye-es. I'd like to talk to you."

He hesitated and the corners of his lips moved. "Of course, ma'am. Come in." He led the way into what had once been a store and pulled out an ancient chair. "We haven't much of a political headquarters."

"I don't want to sit down. I have to tell you something."

"If it's about last night, please don't. I've forgotten it."

She stiffened and anger flickered through her. Did he think she had come here to beg? If he hadn't known the truth when he held her in his arms. . . . "Have you really forgotten?" she asked, making her voice light.

His glance was a cold touch on her face. "Yes, ma'am."

She smiled deliberately, and her growing anger flung scarlet banners into her cheeks. "In that case, you shouldn't have told me. It's not polite to tell any woman you could ever forget her."

His mouth clamped into a thin line. "You said you had something to tell me."

"I have," in that half-edged, half-flirtatious tone. "But first I'd like to be sure, because you see—I haven't forgotten you."

His eyes blazed. Fire burning through their chill. "In that case," he said, his words a thin drawl, "I understand your being here." He moved toward her, almost calmly, and took her into his arms, laughing when she tried to escape.

"I should have told you. I play for

keeps." And he kissed her with hard lips.

She shivered and wanted to sob. No wild, dangerous sweetness in this. Just anger and fierce challenge. The kind of kiss no man should know about.

She drove her small, clenched fists against his chest and broke away from him. But his face was quiet and his eyes unreadable. "I shouldn't have done that and you shouldn't have come here to make me do it."

She tore her glance free and started for the door, hoping he would not see the tears that were burning into her eyes. But, as she remembered, she stopped and made herself face him. "Tom Knox came to see me this morning. He said that if you win the nomination, you'll be killed."

Ransome grinned. "You needn't have told me that, ma'am, but thanks just the same. I figure Knox's crowd will do anything to protect themselves, so I'm ready for a little lead-throwing."

"He controls this country, he can give orders to thousands of men. He's filled every office with people who obey him. If he orders them to kill you—"

"They'll try to do it. But I don't intend to let them. Thanks again, ma'am."

He made the last words an ending, but she could not go. Instead, she remained at the door, looking at him, feeling all of her pride being stripped away from her.

"I didn't come here to—to make you kiss me," she said, her voice a low cry. "And last night—"

His face closed and his eyes did not seem to see her. "I told you last night never happened, ma'am. I'd rather remember this morning. Then it won't be important."

Faith felt the breath stop in her throat and fire poured over her face, as if his hard palm had cracked against her cheek. She jerked blindly at the door and, plunging through it, found herself caught in a crush of men milling about the entrance to the building. Curious onlookers were mingled with the workers and with the soft-faced, sharp-eyed adherents of Tom Knox.

She got through at last and, turning toward home, had to force herself not to run. She would not sob. Not now or ever. Instead, she would always recall Pat Ransome's insolent, stinging words.

"Faith!" Mike Harvey's voice stopped her as she saw his face, fear struck at her.

"What is it?" she cried. "Have you seen Dad?"

"Yes. I just came from your house. Your father's fine."

"But something's happened."

He hesitated. "I've got to ask you a question I don't like. Did Pat Ransome go back to see you after I left last night?"

"Go back to see me—" She did not understand, even as she repeated the words. But then her eyes turned very blue and some of the girlishness left her face. "I'm sorry, Mike. That wouldn't have hurt so much if it had come from anyone else."

"Listen!" His hand closed, impatiently, on her arm. "You know me too well to think I'd get nasty. I've just got to know—because of something I heard."

"Are you serious? What did you hear? Pat didn't come back, but even if he had—"

"I'm afraid you don't understand what such a story means when it's told by the man involved—in a town like this."

"But it couldn't have—" She stopped and her voice trailed off into a thin, high sound. "Told by the man involved.... "Oh, no," she said, her tone once more firm and steady and her breath more even.

Mike's face tightened. "I'll drop in tonight. Better get home and look after your father."

"Where are you going?"

Instead of answering, he moved swiftly away, toward the main street. She watched him, for a moment, and something in the set of his shoulders,

the carriage of his head, frightened her.

"Mike! Wait!"

He did not turn or pause and she ran after him. If he went to Pat Ransome with whatever story had been repeated to him. . . . But who could have thought of such an ugly little tale? Only a few people knew that she had met Ransome, but one of those people was Tom Knox.

Harvey turned into the main street and when she reached the corner he had disappeared. The crowds got in her way and the street before Ransome's headquarters was almost impassable. But finally she worked her way to the doors and asked the nearest man: "Is Dr. Harvey here?"

"Yeah, just came a few minutes ago."

A gun crashed from inside the building and the crowd broke in panic. Those who had been jamming the entrance disappeared in a wild rush for safety. Faith, her legs suddenly unsteady, stumbled toward the door of Ransome's campaign office. When she got it open she saw Mike Harvey lying on the floor. Pat Ransome was standing against the opposite wall, staring at the shattered window, and there was a gun in his hand. Without looking at her he said: "Take care of him. Call that other doctor." And he sprang past her, out of the room.

## VI

FAITH knew, as soon as she knelt beside Mike Harvey, that he was dying. The floor was stained with blood seeping from his chest and he was breathing in hard, choking gasps. She began to call, shrilly, for help, but the men who had run for cover were already streaming into the room. "Get Dr. Adair!" she cried. "Hurry!" She looked around wildly for help.

"Someone's already gone for him," a man grunted. And staring down at Mike, he added: "Looks like this finishes our reform government before it got started. Ransom'll be elected to a noose."

"Out of the way," a voice snapped. "Let the doctor in."

They shuffled back, and white-haired Dr. Adair bent over Mike. "Fix up some kind of stretcher," he said. "Take him to my place. I'll have to operate."

"Then he's—" Faith's voice broke. "He's dying?"

"I don't know. He's in bad shape. Please leave, young lady. You shouldn't be here."

Someone led her to the door and then the sunlight was spilling hotly over her as she walked along the rough sidewalk. Mike was dying. . . . And Pat Ransome? He had not looked at her or noticed her when she found him standing over Harvey with a gun in his hand. If he had shot in self-defense. . . . But Mike never carried a gun.

Her steps slowed sharply, and part of the weight which had crushed down on her when she saw Mike lying on the floor of Pat's office disappeared. "Why, of course," she told herself, speaking aloud. "Tom Knox did this, that's what he meant this morning! If his gang had killed Pat, it might have ruined him politically. But this way is safe. Ransome will be tried for murder."

She went on again, more lightly. There was some way that she could make the truth known. Not to anyone in Lawrence, where every official took orders from Tom Knox. But she would get word to Washington, would go there if necessary!

The house seemed very quiet as she entered, but passing the door of the living room, she jerked to a halt. A man was turning away from the windows, moving toward her. A tall man whose eyes were the color of gray, minted metal. She stepped into the room and closed the door.

"Mike Harvey may be dying and everyone believes you shot him."

"Yeah." The expression of his face did not change. "I figured on that."

"What are you going to do?"

"Several things, but I couldn't leave without seeing you."

"You're leaving?" And then, before he could answer, she rushed on: "Why did you have to see me?"

He hesitated. Had his eyes really changed? Were they clear and young or was she once more imagining that? "Because I want you to know what I said this morning wasn't true. I don't want to forget you. I can't. I'll always remember, Faith, and wish I'd found you sooner."

She felt the blood leaving her face and even her lips turning cold. This was good-by. He was leaving, getting out of the Territory before the law could catch up with him. And he had not denied shooting Harvey! "You can't go," she said, her words just above a whisper.

"I have to, for a lot of reasons. You're the biggest one. It wasn't your fault that I didn't know about Harvey. I didn't give you time to tell me. I saw you and thought—" He broke off and once more the corners of his mouth moved into a faint, wry smile.

"What did you think?" She moved closer to him, watching his face.

"Guess I thought we belonged together—something simple like that."

"It wasn't simple." She could not keep back the words. "Maybe it was right, Pat. Maybe that's how it should be with everyone."

"Yeah, except that it never is. *Adios*, ma'am." He put out his hand and she placed hers in it, but then she was in his arms, which were holding her fiercely against him. His lips were fiery music on her mouth and her racing blood took up the song of his kiss. Yes, it was also magic, the magic she had sought.

When he let her go, she whispered: "No. We *were* meant to be together. Wait!"

He shook his head and there was no youngness or warmth in his eyes. "I told you I'd always remember, but the trouble is I can't forget any part of it—especially Harvey."

FAITH'S father, remaining unwillingly in bed, asked for Mike half a dozen times that day. "I'll make him realize I'm well enough to be up. Send word to him, please."

But Anthony Byers still looked so white and ill that Faith would not tell him the truth. Instead, she said Mike was too busy to look in on him and insisted on his staying in his room.

Evening arrived too slowly and twilight stretched over long-drawn-out hours, during which she kept hearing Pat Ransome's voice saying: "I can't forget any of it—especially Harvey."

While she was having a lonely supper in the kitchen a boy arrived with a message from Dr. Adair, saying that Mike was conscious and asking for her.

She went at once, hurrying along the narrow, unlighted street to Adair's big, frame home. The elderly doctor answered the door and told her, smilingly: "Looks as if we'll get him through."

He led the way to a room at the rear of the house and, as he opened the door, his pleasant-faced wife got up from her place at the bedside. "He's sleeping again," she whispered. "Miss Byers had better wait. She can sit here with him."

They went out and Faith took the chair near Mike's bed. In sleep, his face looked younger and less grave; touchingly unguarded. Why couldn't she have loved him, or have given him all of her love? Maybe he had part of it! And maybe that part would always belong to him. . . .

There was a sound behind her, the door swung in, and Pat Ransome entered the room.

"How did you get here? I thought—"

"Is he conscious?" he asked, ignoring her question. "I was hoping he would be."

The man on the bed stirred restlessly and then his eyes opened. He looked at Faith before his glance went to Pat. "Glad you're here, Ransome. Come closer, so I won't have to shout."

Pat went to the bed and Mike said, swiftly: "Want to tell you while I can

—you've got to get away. Send Faith out of the room for a minute."

"Why—" The girl began, but then she got up and walked out to the hall, shutting the door behind her.

Pat came out a moment later and she demanded: "What did he say? Does he think you shot him?"

Ransome's glance was odd. Remote and almost cold. "No. He wants me to get out of the country. Maybe I'll take his advice."

And, as soon as the last word was spoken, he walked past her, down the hall toward the rear of the house. As he disappeared into the kitchen she realized that he had entered the same way.

She opened the bedroom door, but Mike Harvey was asleep, and for a moment she looked down at him in bewilderment which was mixed with anger. He had sent for her, but had been more interested in talking to Pat Ransome, almost as if they had joined forces against her!

Dr. Adair glanced in and said: "This has been enough of a visit for him, Miss Byers. He's very weak."

He ushered her out the front door and when it closed behind her, she felt lonely and shut away from life. A group of horsemen were pounding down the street and, at their head, was a deputy sheriff. A posse starting the hunt for Pat Ransome. Probably he had been seen near Dr. Adair's house and the lawmen knew he could not be far ahead of them. If they caught him. . . .

Another line of riders was approaching, but these were moving at a walk. Four men, heavily armed, with holsters mounted on their saddles.

They reined in ahead of Faith and two of them dropped to the ground. "Are you Miss Byers?" the first rider asked.

"Ye-es."

"That's what I thought." His heavy-set body swayed forward, one hand clamped over her mouth and the other arm lifted her from her feet.

## VII

BEFORE she could begin to struggle she was put onto his pony and he stepped up behind her, digging in his spurs. The three other men closed in around them and they pounded down the road, traveling north. Within fifteen minutes they had left Lawrence behind and were entering a trail which led to the back hills.

"How is it?" the man holding Faith shouted to a rider behind him.

"Clear."

He took his hand from the girl's mouth. "There's no use yelling or fighting, sister. We're not going to hurt you. But you can't get away, so don't try it."

"Where are you taking me? Why—"

"You'll find out later. Just keep still and you'll be more comfortable." He sent his mount into an even faster pace, and they roared toward the first, dim outline of the hills.

But a mile below, they reined in and waited at the side of the trail. No one spoke until the thud of hoofs broke the stillness and a man rode out of the brush.

"Mac," he called.

"Yeah. All here."

He rode up to them, then, and Faith saw that it was Tom Knox.

"You're responsible for this!" she told him. "You—"

"Hold it, ma'am," he said easily. "There's nothing for you to be afraid of and nobody's going to hurt you. I'm taking you to a nice, comfortable cabin where you'll be all right for a few days."

"Why? What's this about? If you expect my father to pay you—"

He chuckled. "You ought to guess the reason. Pat Ransome's disappeared and he's smart enough to get away from ten posses. But if he hears you've been kidnaped—and he will, because he's got plenty of friends—he'll come back. I know him. When he comes

back, he'll walk right into the strong arms of the law. After that—" He let his words fade into another chuckle.

"After that, you'll see he's sent to jail for shooting Dr. Harvey. But Mike Harvey's not going to die. That'll make it harder for you, won't it?"

"Maybe, but accidents can happen. People might get so worked up, they'd take Ransome out of jail and lynch him even if the doc doesn't die. This town thinks a lot of young Harvey."

She stared at him in amazed disbelief. He was so sure of himself, so conceited about his own power that he was coolly explaining how he intended to cause another man's death!

When she was silent, he told the men: "We'll get going. Couple of hours of traveling ahead."

They started on—only to pull in again at once, their hands jerking wildly at the reins.

A tall figure was standing directly ahead of them on the trail, covering them with two leveled guns. And in spite of the darkness, Faith knew that it was Pat Ransome.

"All right, Tom," he called to Knox. "Drop your guns and get down, quiet-like. I've got that scared little killer you sent to get Harvey back there in the brush. He's all tied up and safe, and he's been talking plenty. I caught him an hour after the shooting. Dumb to throw lead through a window."

Knox did not speak and the men around him tensed, their hands moving toward their weapons.

Ransome said: "Don't go for your irons, boys. If you do I'll let Knox have it first. Better tell 'em, Tom."

"Pat, you're crazy! We've always been friends, so let's talk this over." Knox's voice was actually friendly, but suddenly, even as he was speaking, he flipped out his own weapon. It exploded with a roar.

Both Ransome guns barked at the same moment and Knox went limp. For a second he was a grotesque, soft shape on top of his horse. Then he slid, sidewise, out of the saddle.

The riders remained motionless, their hands still near their guns.

"Come on, then," Pat told them softly. "Start throwing that lead and you won't have to worry about the law."

The man on the lead pony muttered: "He'll get at least one of us, and he's right. We're through."

"Let's pull out," the second man growled. "There's no stake in this for us now."

The rider who had been holding Faith in the saddle before him, stepped down and lifted her to the ground. Then he got up again, hastily, and wheeled his mount. The others followed, driving their ponies to top speed. And, suddenly, the girl sagged. They were gone—and she was free.

"Pat," she said weakly, "I think I'm going to faint. I never have before, but this must be the way it feels."

"No, you're not!" He reached her in two strides and caught her arms. "Hold on to yourself, do you hear?"

"Ye-es." She swayed against him and his arms closed around her.

"Feel better?" he asked.

"A little, but don't let me go."

To her surprise, he laughed. She straightened up, forgetting her faintness, to look at his face. "This hasn't been a very funny experience."

"I was laughing at the idea of letting you go—because I never will."

She started to speak but he stopped her words with his lips. And even now, in the middle of the dark, deserted prairie, his mouth was touched with the thing she had sought. The magic she had almost missed.

But at the end of that kiss, she said: "Then you won't remember Mike? You see, he broke our engagement."

"I know. He told me yesterday. He realizes things like this can happen and he said you belong with me."

"He said that?" She drew out of his arms. "I'm so glad you and he arranged everything! It was sweet of him to give his consent and—"

"Shut up," he said, and kissed her again.

# Love Is the Loot

## By Cliff Walters

***Things were so mixed up in Rim Valley and in Eileen Clark's head that it was pretty hard to tell friend from foe . . . though she woke up just in time.***

HAVING struggled through her first year of school teaching on Stormy Slope in a ramshackle log building afflicted with a leaky roof and winter drafts, Eileen Clark was grateful when her uncle, Frosty Clark, had invited her to make her home at the JY, a hundred miles to the south in Rim Valley. Yet in spite of the month she had been here, she felt that she hardly knew this uncle, this squat-built, blunt man with the chill blue eyes.

On this evening, Frosty Clark stood on the ranch house porch and watched intently a pair of riders coming down the valley.

"Old Jim got him, all right!" said Frosty. And nodded, not without satisfaction, toward the sheriff, Jim Barclay, who was bringing an elderly prisoner downstream.

Eileen's clear brown eyes held to the oncoming horseman. She looked at the elderly sheriff, tall, erect, rather picturesque in his saddle. Then her gaze focused on the prisoner, a stooped, elderly, shaggy-haired man whose feet were encased in ill-made moccasins.

Eileen said to her uncle, "Fortune seems to have followed you into this valley. You were able to buy out three homesteaders and consolidate that land into a very fine ranch. And here's Moccasin Shaw who refused to sell his little place. Now he'll—" She hesitated.

"Now what?" Frosty Clark asked bluntly.

She didn't answer. The two riders were close. The eyes of the prisoner, smouldering under heavy brows, burned at Frosty Clark; and Moccasin Shaw said, "You've baited a trap, Clark. You've sicced the law on me, but you'll never get my little place."

"Baited a trap!" Clark grunted. "You'd still be a free man, Shaw, free to haul beef down to Willow Grove and sell it, if you hadn't made the mistake of butcherin' one of my yearlin's. Or maybe your mistake was in bein' caught—finally. It's hard to tell how many of my yearlin's have been—"

"Just one, I'd guess," said old Moccasin Shaw. "*One* had to be killed, you know. So you'd have a fresh hide to plant on my place. But that place ain't goin' to go by the boards, go for taxes so you can grab it. No matter what happens to me. No matter how many damned lies you and any of your sneakin' riders swear to. They'll be somebody livin' at Horseshoe Springs."

"You're sellin' out?" Clark asked.

"That bothers you, don't it?" Shaw retorted. He looked at Eileen who, having ridden past Horseshoe Springs a couple of times lately, had visited with the lonely old man. To her Moccasin said, "If you saved any money on that school teachin' job, you'd better hide it. And deep somewheres. Coyotes have good smellers, you know." He looked at Clark again.

Clark said to Sheriff Jim Barclay, "Did you trail this crooked old meat peddler down this way just so he could cuss me out, Barclay?"

"Nope," came the reply. "I just wanted to tell you and your puncher to be in town tomorrow for the hearin'."

"Who's takin' over Shaw's place?" Clark asked.

"How do I know?" Barclay replied. "Well, see you in town."

The riders continued their way. Clark grunted, went in the house. Eileen sat down on the porch bench and wondered if she hadn't better apply for another school teaching job next winter. Perhaps there was worse things than winter wind blowing its glacial breath between chinkless logs; worse things than unruly, headstrong children. . . .

"Hello there, Eileen beautiful."

With a little start, the girl turned to see Turk Powell, husky, dark and very handsome, coming up the trail leading from the bunkhouse. "It's about time your guardian angel went in the house and allowed you some company you'd really enjoy."

She smiled. "It's seldom one sees handsome men who are so modest. Won't you come up and sit down? As if you hadn't started to already."

"Oh, Grandma," he retorted, smiling, "how sharp your tongue is tonight! Sharper than a skinnin' knife!"

"I'd like to know," she said, and still more sharply, "whose skinning knife peeled off the hide that was found in Moccasin Shaw's possession. The hide of a JY yearling."

Turk Powell was suddenly sober. "Your uncle tells me you're pretty much upset over this deal. Good gosh! Don't blame me for not ridin' range with my eyes shut. I'm paid to help look after JY stock. If I stumbled onto a JY hide over at Horseshoe

Springs when I rode down there to tighten a loose hind shoe on my horse, don't blame me for mentionin' it to Frosty! And don't blame him for havin' old Shaw picked up and put where he belongs!"

"I'm sorry, Turk," said the girl, suddenly contrite. "It's just that old Moccasin Shaw probably won't have much money to hire a decent lawyer with."

"You want to see him go free, don't you?" Turk said. Then, in a low voice, he added, "Down deep in my heart, I wish the same thing. I try to tell myself that I did right by reportin' the hide-findin' to Frosty; that he was payin' me to look after his stock. But now I half wish I'd just rode back to the ranch, drawed my wages and rode away from here. Not that I could've done that."

"Why not?" she countered. "Wouldn't the loss of one steer mean much less to my uncle than the loss of freedom means to old Moccasin?"

"A lot less—yeah. It wasn't that, Eileen. It was the thought of ridin' away from you."

"Hold on, cowboy. You shouldn't—"

"I know it," he answered. "And I don't want to lose my heart any more than you want old Moccasin to lose his freedom. But I have. I saw you sittin' on this porch a month ago. And since then—" He stopped, jaw set a little, then rose abruptly.

Husky, erect, he stood there silhouetted for a moment against the afterglow of a sun which had slipped down into a notch of the valley's west rim. Then he left the porch and headed for the corrals. Watching him catch and bridle his own sorrel horse, Eileen heard Shorty Talbott, the other JY puncher call, "Hey, Turk! I thought you wasn't goin' to town tonight."

"I've changed my mind," came the answer. "Today was payday, wasn't it? What are we waitin' for?"

Pretty soon two cowpunchers were loping off. And pretty soon two pairs of spurs would be jingling into the noisy saloon. There would be drinks....

Eileen walked to the end of the porch and thought, You're not afraid to ride bucking horses, Turk Powell, but you're afraid to say the thing that's in your heart! Something tells me I'll be gone from here as soon as school starts next fall. So, Turk Powell, if you've got anything to say . . . something that maybe I *want* to hear you say. . . .

IT WAS three nights later before Turk Powell, a bottle in his saddle pocket, and leading a newly purchased roan horse—a bucker he hoped to enter in the contest in Tall Tree—returned to the JY. Even then he didn't come up to the porch where Eileen sat.

He stood beside the corral and talked to Shorty Talbott about the new bucking horse. Somewhat lonesome, and a little irked, Eileen went in the house. Nor did she even so much as look out the window until she heard the excitement down there at the corral.

The roan bucker had been saddled. Now, out there in the dusk, he was really wiping it up with a rider who, unable to match with his skill the fury of those long, high, crooked jumps, was losing his balance after the third jump—and crashing to the ground just beyond the corral.

Eileen's heart leaped to her mouth. She had only glimpsed that rider before he went spinning down to the earth. Now the roan horse was wheeling, was bucking back toward the fallen man.

She raced out the front door and down the porch steps just as another rider, a stranger hard of jaw and lean, came spurring around the corner of the house. He was pulling his gun as he came, and he fired at the roan outlaw now bucking back toward his thrown rider.

The roan bucker squealed, veered away from the fallen man and plunged to the earth himself. Then Turk Powell—Eileen realized now that he wasn't

the thrown rider—came running around the corral. At the lean, bright-haired stranger Turk bawled, "Who the hell do you think you are? Shootin' my horse!"

"I think I'm Dave Mayland, shootin' an outlaw horse before he kills my young brother. Somebody had to stop that killer—and it's a cinch you wasn't tryin' very hard." Dave Mayland rode to the side of his brother, a dazed young fellow of about seventeen, bent over him and tried to help him to his feet.

Eileen could see then that the younger Mayland's left arm dangled limply, and his face looked tense and white in the dusk.

"Take him in the house!" called the girl.

"I'll take him to town—on his old bay horse there," replied Dave Mayland, his voice harsh, flat. "But first I'll know how come he happened to be twistin' broncs for this tinhorn layout!"

"He come along—from the Horseshoe Springs place, he said," replied Turk Powell, "and wanted to borrow a little coffee. I told him I'd give him five pounds of coffee if he'd ride the roan, and he was game."

"Game?" Dave Mayland echoed. "How did Bob here know the roan was a killer? Did you tell him that when you was baitin' a seventeen-year-old kid into riskin' his neck? You needn't answer. You, and the rest of the scum around this crooked outfit, wanted to see anybody—anybody related to old Moccasin Shaw—smashed all to hell!"

"Are you drunk, Mr. Mayland?" Turk countered calmly.

"Not as drunk as you are."

"Good. Then we can talk business. Start shellin' out for that horse you've just killed. He cost me fifty dollars."

"I'll pay you off this way." Dave Mayland, tall, lean, savage as a wolf, smashed a blow to the face of Turk Powell, who viciously retaliated with a blow of his own.

Then they went at it, give and take. Eileen gasped when a vicious blow staggered Turk a little. She gasped again when he nearly felled his tough opponent with a smashing uppercut. Dave Mayland didn't go down, however. Blue eyes glinting with fury, he waded into Turk and punished him with lefts and rights. Punishment that was still being meted out when Frosty Clark came running down from the ranch house.

"Cut it out!" Frosty bellowed. "There'll be no fightin' here."

"There'll be a lot more of it if this buzzard, that ain't quite as handsome as he was a minute ago, don't shell out for the doctor bill on my brother's busted arm. . . . Come on, Bob. We ridin' to town. I'd taken you with me in the first place if I'd known you was comin' down to this buzzard roost to bum grub."

"I didn't know the JY had it in for *us*," said the younger brother.

"You know what they did to old Moccasin, don't you? They'll have us in jail with him—if they have their way. They want the Horseshoe Springs place to go by the boards. Remember that!"

"Are you payin' for that horse you killed?" Turk Powell asked.

"Try to collect!"

"All right. Maybe I will, Mr. Mayland, as long as you're goin' to be livin' right handy here. If I ketch you alone out on the range—"

"You've got it backwards," came the reply. "Coyotes never chase men. But you'll see me, as soon as the doc in Tall Tree hands me the bill for fixin' this kid's arm. And you'll pay that bill, one way or another. Just like this thievin' layout here'll pay Moccasin Shaw for the time he spends in jail."

"Get off this place. Stay off!" Frosty Clark ordered. "If that damned old thief has brought some of his tribe in here to scare the JY, you'd better watch your step. I'm not after Horseshoe Springs."

"You tried pretty hard to buy it once, didn't you?" said Dave Mayland.

"Well, let's see if you get it. Old Moccasin never had much money, but what he got, he got honestly. And some of that he spent helpin' to send me and my brother here to school. We happen to know he's honest—which proves that you're a crook, Mr. Clark, or Moccasin wouldn't be in jail."

As the Mayland brothers rode off toward town, Turk Powell growled, "He'll pay me for that buckin' horse!"

"Why did you let that seventeen-year-old boy tackle such a killer as that horse?" Eileen demanded. "I don't think it was a very sporting thing to do, Turk. But perhaps you're not quite yourself tonight. I don't know whether Dave Mayland's fists have made you a little groggy, or whether—"

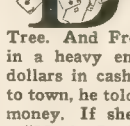
"Do you s'pose Turk would've paid fifty dollars for that roan if he knowed he was a killer?" inquired Shorty Talbott.

"Don't try to defnd a whisky-drinkin' tramp like me, Shorty," said Turk. "Of course I wanted to see that kid killed. Tromped to death by a killer's hoofs. If there's anything I like better'n the sight of whiskey, it's blood!" He turned toward the barn and said, "I'll hook up a team, Frosty, and drag this roan carcass out in the hills. That is, if your niece can trust me with a team."

"What's she got to do with it?" Frosty Clark, irked, looked hard at his niece who suddenly felt ashamed. She wished, now, she'd remained at the house. "First thing in the morning, Turk, you and Shorty move that bunch of steers down here from the upper pasture. The cattle buyer'll be out here pretty early tomorrow."

Eileen went to the house and to her room. Later she heard the creak of the wagon Turk was driving; heard the rattle of a log chain, and knew a roan outlaw was making his final trip into the sage-covered hills swathed in the haze of the starlight.

She went to bed, but couldn't sleep. She kept seeing two men locked in battle. Turk Powell, husky and handsome, fighting for all he was worth. . . . Dave Mayland, lean, fierce, cool, taking punishment and giving it. Somehow Eileen felt that, had there been ten Turks to battle, Dave Mayland would have waded into them. This tough, blond-haired man was made of steel. He might be whipped, might be killed, but never scared. And, although the girl dreaded the dark shadows of trouble she could see on the horizons of Rim Valley, she was glad that Moccasin Shaw's little place was being guarded by such a man as Dave Mayland.



BY MID-MORNING the following day, the cattle buyer and his hired man were driving a bunch of young steers toward Tall Tree. And Frosty Clark was putting in a heavy envelope fifteen hundred dollars in cash. He would have to go to town, he told Eileen, and deposit the money. If she'd like to come along.

"Maybe I will," she answered, "and stay there two or three days. I'd like to make some inquiries about a teaching job."

"You'd prefer that to living here?" asked her uncle, and sounded disappointed. "I'd hoped you'd like it here, Eileen. But I guess it's just as lonesome for you as it was for me before you came. I—I kinda thought that you and one of the hardest-workin', handsomest punchers I've ever seen would hit it off better'n you do."

She flushed. "I'd never suspect you of taking time out from your business to become a matchmaker, Uncle Frosty. Mother used to tell me that's why you'd never married."

"I guess I shouldn't blurt things out the way I do," he answered. "Turk seemed to think he'd be inheritin' some money one of these days, that he might buy an interest in the outfit here. I just thought that—well—"

"I see. He'll be more than just a cowpuncher some day. I'm glad to hear it,

but I'm afraid that, whatever I think about him, he isn't quite so fond of me as he appeared to be at first. Let's just forget it, for a little while at least. That trouble last night upset everyone, it seems. I'll get into my riding togs and—"

Turk Powell came riding up to the porch then. Tipping his hat, he said, "I'm here to apologize to you, Eileen, for saying what I did last night. And to tell you, Frosty, that the fence is broke down in the pasture where you keep the little bunch of purebred white faces."

"Hell!" Clark growled. "We can't have them mixin' with the range cattle. Well, we'll have to postpone the trip to town, Eileen. I'll use the house for a bank today, I guess." He started indoors.

"Anything I can help with, Turk?" asked the girl.

"An extra rider could help round up them strayin' purebreds, all right. They're already in the rough country to the west of the pasture."

"I'll help then."

Eileen hurried inside, changed to her riding clothes and was at the corral almost as soon as her uncle was.

"Didn't Turk wait?" asked the girl.

"No time to wait now."

The girl and her uncle rode toward the upper valley. They were crossing a ridge when Eileen said, "Look!" She was pointing toward Horseshoe Springs. But there was no cabin there now. Only a charred spot where it had stood. And half the corral was charred wreckage.

Before Frosty Clark chose to comment on what he saw, a rider came over the ridge. He was Dave Mayland, still stern of jaw, and with the battle smouldering in his blue eyes.

To Clark he said, "I don't see you sheddin' any tears over what *you* see, Clark. I guess I made a mistake last night when I said in front of you that I was takin' my broken-armed kid brother to town." Those words were arrows sped from the taut bow of hate.

"Hold on, Mayland," Clark growled. "I didn't set no fires last night. I was at home and— Well, ask this girl."

"Why bother askin' her?" came the reply. "She probably don't want her rich uncle stuck behind bars—where he deserves to be a lot more'n old Moccasin Shaw. Nope. You ride to town with me, Clark. Now!"

"I can't right now, and I wouldn't anyhow! If you're pullin' a trick of some kind, Mayland, to get me behind bars—show me up as a cabin-burnin' crook and force me to drop charges against your uncle—"

"So you won't come to town, eh? Well, you'll come later."

"My uncle didn't burn your cabin!" Eileen said sharply. "He was at home all last night, and this morning too!"

"Was he?" Dave Mayland answered. He touched spurs to his horse and rode on down the valley.

"Come on, Eileen. Let's get them cattle rounded up!" said her uncle. "Don't fret about Mayland."

Troubled, the girl followed her uncle. The two of them were heading into the rough country west of the purebred pasture when, again topping a ridge, Frosty Clark froze in his saddle and pointed down valley. Eileen stared, gasped as she saw a cloud of black smoke rolling up into the sky—above the spot where the JY ranch buildings were located.

"Dirty damned tribe!" Clark spurred his horse toward home, with Eileen spurring after him. But it was quite a long ride. The house was a roaring inferno when the two riders were still a mile away. They could only spur on and watch it burn.

"My clothes. All I've got!" cried the distraught girl.

"Yeah—clothes!" her uncle yelled. "What about that fifteen hundred cash?"

"Oh, heavens!" she moaned. She hadn't thought about that.

Once on the scene, it was all Eileen and Clark could do to save the barn and other buildings toward which

breeze-whipped sparks were sailing. Then Turk Powell, his horse dripping sweat, came spurring down valley and worked like a Trojan to help.

Frosty Clark stared at the charred remains of his ranch home. He said, "I'll put Dave Mayland behind bars for this, and for the rest of his life, or kill him!"

"Mayland?" Turk echoed. "Did he do this?"

"Yes!" Clark growled.

"You can't swear that he did it," Eileen put in.

"Stop meddling! Stop tryin' to whitewash that crooked layout!" her uncle exploded. "You didn't want old Shaw jailed when Turk caught him with the goods on him. Nor maybe you don't know that Moccasin Shaw was mixed up with a wild bunch of lootin' coyotes a few years ago. One of that bunch, Wind River Doyle, was caught and wounded in Shaw's cabin at Horseshoe Springs. Doyle, a killer, holin' up there when—"

"But about young Mayland," Turk cut in. "What makes you think he burned your house?"

" 'Cause he accused me of burnin' the Horseshoe Springs cabin. Then he rode down this way."

"You s'pose his cabin's really burned?" Turk said. "Or was it just an excuse to—"

"It's burned, all right," Clark said. "I saw it. But Mayland could've done it himself, so he'd have an alibi for this." The cowman clenched his hands. "Is your gun, and Shorty's, in the bunkhouse?"

"Yeah," Turk answered. "And I think it's time we was takin' those guns, some fresh horses, and headin' along Mayland's trail. We'll find him, all right!"

"So it's going to be murder now, is it?" Eileen spoke tensely. "A man is going to be shot down without trial!"

"Stop meddlin'!" her uncle shouted. He turned, followed Turk toward the bunkhouse.

After an instant's hesitation, Eileen turned the slim gray horse she rode into the willows fringing the creek. A minute later she was riding fast, picking up the fresh tracks of a horse traveling toward Tall Tree.

"Meddlin'!" she said to herself. "Well, if meddling can prevent murdering. . . ."

EILEEN rode fast as she followed the tall line of trees which followed Rim Creek. Yet she was some little distance from the ranch when, rounding a bend of the stream, she came upon a solitary rider. He was staring at the ground ahead of him, and now turned quickly and dropped his hand to the forty-five slung at his hip.

"You!" said Dave Mayland, and stopped his horse.

"Don't stop," she answered. "Ride faster, get to town as soon as you can. Go to Sheriff Barclay's place and then—"

"Why?" he asked.

"So you won't be killed—or have to kill anyone else," she answered impatiently. "My uncle and Turk Powell are going to be riding down this valley pretty soon. Too soon, perhaps. And they're carrying guns now. Oh, if you'd gone to town—gone to the sheriff in the first place, instead of stopping to set that fire—"

"I didn't set fire to anything," he interrupted.

"You can tell that in court," she answered. "You'll stand a better chance there than you will here in these hills. Stay in town. Don't come back."

"What's been burned now?" he asked.

"The J Y ranch house."

His narrowed eyes were suddenly suspicious. "What kind of a trap is this one? I *was* goin' to town, but now I'm not. And who's that rider headin' for Horseshoe Springs way up there?" He pointed to a horseman disappearing from view.

"How do I know?" she said.

"I'll find out." He spurred his horse across the creek.

"You fool!" Eileen shouted. "I tried to warn you, but—" He was already beyond hearing distance. Tears welled to the girl's eyes. This is what she got for meddling! The censure of her uncle and the distrust of a man she was trying to protect.

She turned her horse, started homeward slowly. She hadn't gone far when she met her uncle and Turk Powell. Turk said, "Where's that fire-crazy Mayland? Did you come down here and warn him?"

"I told him to get to town—yes. As fast as he could," she answered truthfully.

"He'll have to ride fast—if he ever gets there!" Turk answered. "Come on, Frosty!"

The two men rode on at a fast clip; and Eileen was grateful for the screen of thickly growing trees which hid from view the range beyond the stream. Then she had reason to be still more grateful. Sure that Dave Mayland would make for town with all possible haste, Clark and Turk Powell veered off the road and headed across open range for a distant butte around which the road wound. They thought, apparently, that this would gain them a little time.

Eileen didn't ride back to the charred ruins of the ranch house. Wondering as to the identity of the rider on the black horse whom Dave Mayland had sighted, she crossed the creek and headed for Horseshoe Springs. Shorty Talbott, the JY puncher, had ridden a black horse this morning. Was he up to something? And did he know something about the burning of the cabin at Horseshoe Springs?

"A little more meddling won't hurt," the girl told herself.

The girl was within a few hundred yards of Horseshoe Springs when she stopped beside a dense clump of cedars to watch the movements of a man who had ridden a black horse up there. Was that Shorty Talbott?

"Get back outa sight!" said the voice of Dave Mayland sharply. As he spoke, he emerged from the cedars, grabbed her bridle bit, and forced her gray back a few steps. "Who drug that dead roan horse out in the hills last night?"

"Turk Powell," she answered. "Why?"

He didn't answer that. He just said, "Thanks for makin' your uncle and Powell think I'd hit out for town. I saw 'em dustin' it that way. I'm sorry now I said what I did to you. I might've known, just by lookin' at you, that you're as decent as you are pretty."

"Is that Shorty Talbott up there at the spring?"

"Nope. It's a stranger to me. I don't know what he's doin' up there. Look at him! Pawin' around that crevice in the rim, just below the place where the cabin stood, like a coyote huntin' a lost den."

"What *is* he hunting?" he asked.

"I wish I knew. But we'll wait, let him find it if he can, then we'll ride up there."

That was quite a wait, one during which the girl and man talked in low tones. Dave Mayland denied having set fire to the JY ranch house. The way he spoke that denial, the way in which his gaze met Eileen's, made her feel he spoke the truth.

"I'm not here to fight and burn houses," he told her. "I'm here to look after Moccasin Shaw's place. Keep an eye on his few head of stock. Hold the fort till he's freed. That old man's honest, Eileen Clark. As honest and generous as they come. It was him that sent grub money to my mother when Bob and me were little—and starvin'. But your uncle ain't satisfied with jailin' Moccasin. He's got to burn his cabin, the only home the old man's got. Or have it burned. How long was Turk Powell away from the ranch last night when he drug that roan's carcass out to—"

"There's Turk now," said the girl excitedly, and pointed to a horseman

wending his way among the cedars on another ridge between the rimrock and the one she and Dave occupied.

"Yeah!" It seemed as if Dave Mayland were bristling like a lean mastiff. But he made no move.

Turk Powell rode on, dismounted and crouched behind a huge rock jutting from the ridge, a position from which he could watch the mysterious man working over by the rimrock. Suddenly that mysterious man—he had disappeared into the rocky crevice which split the rimrock's base—came hurrying out. He was jamming something into his pockets as he hurried toward his black horse.

But he never quite reached the black. The gun in Turk Powell's hand cracked—and down went the little man.

Eileen gasped, moaned, "Of all the cowardly acts!"

Dave had pulled his gun. He was watching Turk Powell cautiously descend the ridge and move toward the fallen man. Dave moved, too; and Eileen followed. Pretty soon the girl heard the wounded man yell, "Don't shoot no more, Powell. We'll split the roll!"

"Split—hell!" Powell rumbled. "I got to this range first, Frenchy! It was me that made it safe for loot-hunters around here. I got rid of old Mocassin Shaw, and was gettin' rid of his damned nephews. I thought it might take quite a hunt to find what you've got in your pocket there!"

"It's as much mine as it is yours, Powell!" groaned the hard-looking little man called Frenchy. "I overheard Wind River Doyle and Boots Ballantine talkin' about the cache same as you did."

Wind River Doyle! That name came back to Eileen now. That was the outlaw her uncle had mentioned this morning. The wounded outlaw who had been trapped at Moccasin Shaw's cabin! Evidently Doyle hadn't wanted Shaw to know that he carried loot money, or old Moccasin might have turned him in to Sheriff Jim Barclay.

"Shaw didn't know Doyle was an outlaw, accordin' to Wind River's story!" Powell was saying to Frenchy.

"But nobody up on this range knows what I am, either. Well, with this money I can make love to a certain pretty girl. Pour my heart out to her!"

"At least let me get away with my life, Powell!" Frenchy pleaded.

"I will like hell!" The gun in Powell's hand started to come up again.

"Better not, Powell!" called Dave Mayland.

TURK POWELL whirled as Dave, with his free hand, shoved Eileen away from him. Two guns roared their noisy defiance at each other and sent echoes hammering at the rimrock. Eileen stifled a cry and dreaded to look. Yet she did look. And saw Turk Powell, lips twitching, spin halfway around by the impact of a bullet that had raked across his left ribs. He swore, tried to right himself and whip his gun around for a second shot at Dave Mayland whose left arm had been furrowed by a bullet.

Again Dave shot, and with the cool, fierce deliberation that had marked with battle of fists with Turk Powell. This time Powell's gun fell from his hand, a hand that was useless because the arm above it had been smashed by lead.

"Good for you, stranger!" said Frenchy, who had already felt the sting of Powell's gunfire.

Dave paid no attention to that tribute. Gun still lveled for action, he moved slowly toward Powell who, handsome face pale and distorted with pain, now slumped on the ground.

"So you made this place safe for loot-hunters, eh?" Dave asked. "It don't look too safe right now, does it? Before I take you to town, though, I'm collectin'—if you've got any cash on you—for that doctor bill you're s'posed

to pay." He started ripping at Powell's pockets.

Suddenly Eileen emitted a cry there was no time to stifle. A long packet of money in an envelope had come into view.

"What's all this?" Dave Mayland asked. "Where did you make this haul? Not punchin' cows, I hope, Powell?"

"That's Uncle Fred's money!" shouted the girl. "Now I know who burned the ranch house. And that's why the pasture fence was torn down —so my uncle couldn't go to town and put that money in the bank."

"The same gent set fire to this cabin here," said Dave. "On the way up here I stopped by the carcass of a roan horse. I could see where somebody had unhitched a team and had rode one of those horses in this direction. You might as well tell us about that yearlin' hide that got Moccasin in trouble, too, Powell. Or will I choke the truth out of you?"

"I planted the hide!" Powell answered. "What the hell's the difference who knows it now?"

Eileen turned to see her uncle walking around the half-burned corral. She called, "Come here, Uncle Frosty and hear what happened!"

"I've heard enough. And seen enough," he said flatly, his frosty eyes on Powell. "Why didn't you kill him, Mayland, when he gave you such a good chance?"

"I'd rather have him talk, like he has, and then spend the rest of his days behind bars," came the reply. "Well, there's your money, Mr. Clark. I—I don't know about this loot that these crooks have uncovered."

"Keep it," mumbled Clark. "You sure deserve *some* reward for shootin' Powell. And besides—" Clark didn't finish. Frenchy Larue, who had broken out of the penitentiary a few days ago, had squirmed around in his agony toward the gun which had fallen from Powell's hand. Now that gun cracked. Lead tore into Turk Powell who rocked over and lay still.

"Turn about, eh?" groaned Frenchy, himself on the verge of death. The gun in his hand sagged to the earth and his fingers relaxed.

Eileen shudered, turned away. Her uncle came along before she had gone many steps, laid a gentle hand on her arm and said, "Thanks for meddlin', lady. If, blinded by Powell's tricks, I'd helped him kill Dave Mayland this morning. . . ."

"Promise me I'm really forgiven?" She tried to smile, but tears were in her eyes. Something had melted the frosty armor from this man. There was gentleness in his tone, in his eyes now.

"If you promise to live in that new house we're goin' to build on the JY," he replied. "A house you can design. And make it big enough because—"

"Because what?"

"Hey, Mayland!" he called. "Moccasin'll be comin' home as soon as we get to town. How about you helpin' me run the JY? Eileen wants you to, and—"

"Well, if *she* wants me to. . . ." Dave Mayland was actually smiling, a warm, friendly smile that did something to Eileen's heart. "Will you have a job for my kid brother, too, after his arm's well?"

"Sure!" Clark answered. "The more Maylands, the better! From what I've seen of 'em. How about you, Eileen?"

"That goes for me, too!" she answered firmly.

"Thanks for sayin' that," said Dave, coming forward now. "But I warn you, if I'm near you all the time, Eileen Clark, I'm goin' to start makin' love —and for the first time in my life."

★ ★ ★ ★

**Take the change from that quarter you've spent on Ranch Romances and buy a WAR SAVINGS STAMP**

# Stars of the Arena

## JOE WELCH

*Roper and Bronc-Rider*

JOE WELCH, one of our top rodeo contestants, was born and raised in Carlsbad, New Mexico, and was content with making the shows around his home town till the bug really bit him in 1930. The first rodeo where he cashed in big was at Roswell, New Mexico, when he won both the roping and bronc-riding. From then on he couldn't stay put. So he decided to come to New York and try his luck at the Garden. In the fall of 1930 he won the calf-roping and bareback bronc-riding there, and that's going some when you have the cream of the rodeo world to compete against.

At the Twin Falls, Idaho, rodeo he won the calf-roping and in 1931-2-3 the all-around cowboy title at Soda Springs, Idaho. Later the same title was his at North Platte, Nebraska, and numerous other titles have come his way since he left the old homestead at Carlsbad.

Joe is a neighbor of Elmer Helper, a top-hand who quit the rodeo game to run his own ranch. It looks as if the game would lose Joe one of these days, too. He's already deputy sheriff at Carlsbad under Sheriff Hal Gage, and likely it's only a question of time till he becomes sheriff.

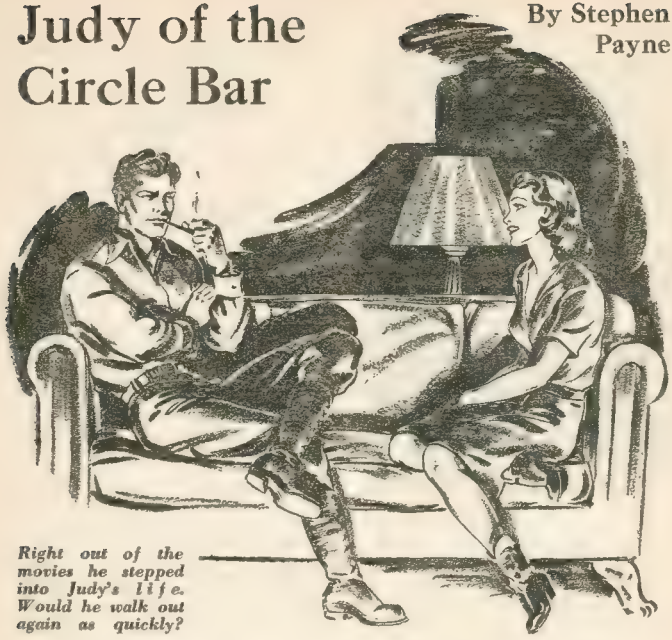
While at the Cavalcade Billy Rose staged at Fort Worth, Texas, Joe met Lotama Hilburn and they quietly eloped to Marietta, Oklahoma. They have two sweet kids—Jim, two and a half, and Jan, one and a half. Jim already rides his own horse.

At the opening night in the Garden this fall Joe made the fastest time in both bulldogging and calf-roping. He roped his calf in sixteen seconds flat and threw his steer in thirteen.

*Tex Sherman*

# Judy of the Circle Bar

By Stephen Payne



*Right out of the movies he stepped into Judy's life. Would he walk out again as quickly?*

TO JUDY he looked like the average fisherman from the big city—rubber boots and creel, a slouch hat with flies hooked around its band, and a soft shirt open at the neck, with sleeves rolled up as if to aid the wearer in acquiring a coat of tan. She had come stealing up behind him as he stood near the corral, casting his line in the clear stream. He must have heard her there, for he turned and smiled and took off his hat.

Judy caught her breath. He was young and athletic, with wide shoulders and dark, wavy hair. Such a fascinating smile, too. Tommy Hargraves couldn't have smiled like that if he practiced in front of a mirror for ten years.

"Why, hello, young lady! Am I dreaming? Or are you real?"

Judy couldn't help feeling pleased. But she must not let this very good-looking stranger get his way by inducing her to swallow such flattery.

She said, "I saw you drive your car across the bridge where the willows would hide you from the house. I listened to make sure, and after I heard you shut off your motor I waited until you came down the river. Now I've caught you fishing on our ranch."

Although he was still smiling, the young fellow looked a bit shame-faced. "But I haven't caught even one of your wily trout. And I did want a mess of

them for my dinner." A wistful glance at the stream. "I've driven two hundred miles to get here."

Judy steeled herself to be cold and hard and practical. "That's not my fault. You couldn't have helped seeing the 'No Fishing' sign on our gate. Now you must go."

"But this is my first chance to get into the mountains, to camp and to fish and to sleep in the open. I've been looking forward to it! When my new picture was finished at last, I threw my duffel into the old car and—"

"Your new picture!" Judy's voice was filled with awe. "Then you—you're a movie hero?"

The stranger started to reel in his line. "In a modest way, yes. Perhaps you've seen my name—Brant Comstock?"

"Brant Comstock? Well," she blushed, "you see, I hardly ever see any pictures. . . . But that you're an actor does make a difference."

"Does it?" The smile had returned, and there was a gay twinkle in the deep brown eyes, both smile and twinkle doing strange things to Judy's romantic heart. "And now may I ask your name?"

"It's Judy Forrest." Impulsively she added, "Suppose you catch that mess of trout. Then suppose I cook them for you. You see, since you're camping alone and I'm holding down the ranch alone, if we can eat together we'll both be less lonesome."

"A jim-dandy idea! But do you mean to say, Miss Judy, you're alone on this big ranch?"

Judy shrugged. "I'm seventeen, and there's nothing to be afraid of."

"I suppose not. But I can't imagine your folks leaving—"

"Daddy and Mother had to drive to Dawson on busines. They know I'll be all right. I've stayed alone before."

"You have, Judy!" surveying her with frank admiration. "But if the fishing goes well I may not get back until evening. That O.K.?"

"O.K." Judy was radiant. "Now it's settled. We'll have supper together. *Adios!*"

Not even feeling her feet touch the earth, she sped back to the house. What was this new and strange and wonderful something which had come into her life?

Joyfully she carried in wood and water. She built a fire in the range and made a cake and a pie. What else would *they* have for supper? Fresh butter and fresh buttermilk would be a treat for Brant, so Judy churned, although this was only Tuesday and the churning was usually done on Saturday.

She fed the chickens and gathered the eggs, she fed the pigs, she corralled the milk cows, she watered and fed her saddle pony, Torchy. She had even done the milking and separated the milk when at last Brant Comstock arrived.

Though he was sunburned and bitten by mosquitoes and gnats, he was happiness itself. He called, "Hi, Judy! Just look at this catch! Twenty, all ready to fry! I could almost eat 'em raw."

"I'll bet you could. You won't have to do that. . . . Brant, over there across the bridge where you left your car isn't a good place to camp. Why couldn't you pull in here and pitch your tent somewhere in the yard?"

Judy had told him she wasn't afraid of being alone, but all the same it would be reassuring to have someone near. That is, someone like Brant Comstock.

She noticed that he hesitated, pinching his sunburned chin where whiskers were showing their dark heads. At last he shrugged, and she heard him murmur, "I guess it's all right, fella. There's nobody around here to talk."

Judy, watching Brant go for his car, thought with alarm, "There *is* somebody. Mrs. Hargraves, darn her scandal-wangling tongue! And Dad probably asked Tommy Hargraves to come to help me with the chores even though I told him not to bother."

A minute later she was cooking the

trout. She had biscuits browning in the oven, lima beans simmering in a pot, potatoes frying in a skillet. She heard the brown car chug-chug into the yard and pull up beside the little old ice house, and Brant had already pitched his tent before she called, "Come and get it!"

Brant ate like a hungry man, thoroughly enjoying every bite. When at last pie and cake appeared he cried,

"Why, Judy, you shouldn't have done all this for me! You're a dream girl!"

"Meaning what, Brant?" her head on one side, birdlike. Would his answer be disappointing? It wasn't. It was exactly what she hoped he would say:

"The kind of girl a fellow dreams about yet never hopes to find!"

When the pie had gone the way of all good pies, she said, "You must light your pipe, Brant."

His eyes were one great twinkle. "Why?"

"Actors—the kind I like most—smoke pipes and have their pictures taken posing sort of like this," striking an attitude.

"Judy, Judy, you're one continual source of amazement and of delight. However, I do smoke a pipe, so here goes. . . . Should the chin be up or down a bit more? Get the exact profile, photographer. . . . Now about dishes and other chores!"

"I've done practically everything except dishes. You can wash and I'll wipe, and then, Mr. Brant Comstock, you're to tell me all about your work."

The dishwashing was fun. But when they were seated in the living room, with Brant enjoying his pipe, he disappointed her. "I'd lots rather hear about you, Judy—about your life here."

"But Brant, there's nothing here, nothing I know all about that's interesting or romantic or thrilling. It's all so dull and drab and humdrum."

"I don't believe that for a minute—not ranch life."

"Let me tell you about it so you can see how stupid it is. We—that's Daddy and Mother and I—raise hay on the Circle Bar. In the spring we fix fences to keep cattle out of our fields, and we start irrigating to raise the hay. It's just one round of hard work from daylight till dark.

"But now Daddy and Mother are gone to Dawson to try to get money so we can go into the cattle business. If we can, everything will be lots more interesting. I like to punch cows. I ride down to the Box Four and the TU lots of times and work with the cowboys. Get a big kick out of it, and they say I make a hand, too.

"I love breaking broncs and trailing cattle. I'm dippy over little calves, and most of all I love the roundups. But here at home we just raise hay. When it's ready to cut, we get a crew of men to put it up in stacks, you know. I help Mother cook for the crew, or I run a sweep or a rake."

"Is that so dull, Judy?"

"Dull, Brant? It's deadly. Only excitement is if you have a bad runaway. I had a humdinger last summer. Got thrown off the rake and dragged along by its teeth. If the rake hadn't bounced up in the air I guess I'd have been a goner. . . .

"In the fall we fence the haystacks. Then Daddy sells the hay to some cowman who puts cattle in the fields, and when snow comes Daddy feeds the hay to the cattle. The snow gets neck deep to a tall Indian, and we wear out two four-horse teams breaking trails to the haystacks. You must always feed the cattle, blizzard or no blizzard. Daddy and I were out in a blizzard last winter where we couldn't see even the wheel team."

"How did you ever get home?"

"Oh, the horses stuck to the trail. They're real smart about that, because if they get off the trail they're wallowing in snow to their necks. . . . Once in a while there's a dance and sometimes we go to town. All terribly exciting, isn't it?"

"I think I'd find it so," said Brant.

Judy opened her eyes wider, all excitement and interest again. She edged

her chair around until she was facing Brant in the lamplight. "Why, you were interested!"

"Of course, I was. . . . And now I'll hit the hay. Good night."

Judy blew out the lamp and sat for a little while in the soft darkness, a smile on her lips and a warm glow enveloping her. "But everyone says the course of true love never runs smooth," she told herself.

THE following morning she was again walking on air while Brant helped with the chores. He showed more skill with ranch work than should be expected of a city fellow. He even insisted upon milking "Ornery," the bad-tempered cow who delighted in kicking and jerking, and for his stubbornness Brant was kicked over, milk bucket, stool and all.

He helped Judy get the breakfast, and they had just finished the meal when there was a chud of hoofs followed by a metallic ring of spurs, and Tommy Hargraves was standing in the open kitchen door.

Judy's frightened eyes saw Brant's amused glance travel up the stocky body of this self-important young man. Tommy wore run-over cowhide boots, greasy overalls with a red bandanna hanging half out of one hip pocket, a faded blue shirt in need of a visit to a wash tub, leather cuffs and a slouchy black hat. This hat he did not bother to lift from tangled black hair which framed raggedly a full round face with too-small mouth and too-wide nose, and eyes that were little and dark and mean.

Judy, instantly on her feet, was instantly on the defensive as well. "Wh—why, hello, Tommy. You needn't have come. I—I'm making out dandy."

"Ye-ah, I see you are." Tommy said it meaningly, and favored Brant Comstock with a slant-eyed look.

Still with that amused smile, Brant took the situation in hand, introducing himself and shaking hands with Tommy. "I'm enjoying the fishing here—and also Judy's hospitality."

"Ye-ah, I see you are," repeating his earlier words. "A city jake, ain't you?"

Brant shrugged unconcernedly. "I suppose I might be called that. You're a cowman, I take it?"

Tommy swelled with importance. "Sure am. You from the city, Comstock? My ma'll want to know."

Tommy's mother would indeed want to know! Judy felt rage and rebellion surging within her. Now why should this—this lout have to appear at the Circle Bar and spoil everything?

Brant, however, seemed quite unruffled. "That's right, Hargraves. . . . We-ell, if I'm going to hook a mess of trout for lunch I must be at it. You'll excuse me?"

Brant was cheerfully whistling *There's a Long, Long Trail* as he went to his tent. But Judy felt no music either in her mind or in her heart. She found her hands trembling as she cleared the table.

She felt Tommy's eyes upon her, questioning, suspicious, condemning. "Your dad and ma gone," said Tommy. "Him and you all there is on the place."

"It's none of your business! And it's all right."

"You just wait till my ma hears 'bout this."

Judy's heart leaped into her throat and choked her. She knew how gossipy Mrs. Hargraves could twist even the most trivial incident into the pattern she wished it to take. Judy believed this woman's wagging tongue the most malicious thing in all the nearby world.

Tommy Hargraves, so very like his mother, was licking his lips as if already gloating over the promised scandal. There were a few terrible moments during which Judy, as if a nightmare gripped her, could say nothing. Then she heard,

"Your old dad hates tourists, city jakes and fishermen! But just the minute him and your ma go away, Miss

Judy takes up with a young city slicker, and—"

"Stop!" cried Judy. "You're just as nasty as your horrid old mother. You're—"

"You slamming my ma?"

"Oh, I didn't mean that. Not the way it sounded." Judy thought quickly. "You see, Tommy, the situation isn't what you think it is at all. I—I have every right in the world to live in the same house with Brant Comstock if I choose."

"Huh?" Tommy looked slightly less like a smug hypocrite. "What you getting at, Judy?"

"Brant is my husband."

Having taken this plunge, Judy thought triumphantly, "There! Will that spike the guns of the gossips!"

But in another moment Tommy was hooting the idea that Judy could have been married so quickly after her parents had left the ranch. He demanded proof.

And Judy told a convincing story. A story based on the fact that during the month of April she had visited her aunt in the city—as Tommy and the entire neighborhood knew. At that time she had met Brant Comstock and they had been married, keeping the wedding quiet because she was under age. Nevertheless, Daddy and Mother had been delighted, and when Brant had come to the ranch early yesterday they had welcomed him as their son.

But after Tommy had mounted and turned his horse toward the gate leading to the highway, he threw a parting shot. "Well, the wedding sure won't be a secret no longer!"

When she could again think clearly, Judy asked herself with terrible uneasiness, "I wonder if I haven't jumped out of the frying pan into the fire!"

She petted the big yellow cat, told him her worries, and received in return only the cold comfort of a complaining "Meow." The day dragged past as if it never would end. Then once again it was evening and the chores were done and supper was all ready except for frying the trout Brant would bring.

When he did arrive he was more sunburned, more tortured by mosquitoes and gnats than yesterday. But he was gloriously happy—so happy that his mood transmitted itself to troubled Judy.

SUPPER was over, the dishes washed. Brant's pipe was scenting the living room where he and Judy were sitting with the big old kerosene lamp between them on the table, when all at once from out-of-doors on every side of the log house arose a most terrific din. The blast of a trumpet and a mouth organ; the tinny rattle of pieces of iron on dishpans and tubs; the clanging of cowbells and the wild whooping of many voices all combined into an ear-splitting bedlam of noise.

Brant dropped his pipe and threw at the girl a strange, startled glance. "What the dickens?"

"What the dickens?" reiterated Judy, marveling that her lips and tongue had moved when otherwise she felt petrified.

Faces at the windows now. Men and women, girls and boys pounding on the glass, rattling the doors. A stentorian voice called:

"Hi there, bride and groom! Open up and give us a treat. The cigars are on you."

Never had Judy seen anyone look quite so astounded as Brant Comstock. She sprang up and caught his arm. "It's a charivari," she said in a hollow tone. "Oh, Brant," and her eyes sought him, "you must—you must act as if we're married and go through with it."

"Bu—but why, Judy? It's all a mistake."

"No," wildly. "They think— Here they are. . . . Oh, hello, Mrs. Gates and Mrs. Bridger. Hello, everybody! How do you do, Mrs. Hargraves (you old hell-cat!). Hello, Tommy. (I could choke you!)"

Thus Judy carried on, a smile on her lips, her heart frozen with dread, welcoming the neighbors, the ranchers and their wives, their sons and daughters, their cowboys and ranch hands. She introduced Brant to them all at once, "My husband, Brant Comstock, everybody."

She watched the young fellow with only she knew what trepidation. But he played up to her lead! He carried out the deception magnificently, like the actor he was.

Soon the living room was cleared of its furniture and rugs. Old Mort Goodspeed turned up his fiddle, and Bert Dawson his banjo. Together they opened up with *Turkey in the Straw*. The neighbors were dancing. Judy was dancing with them one after another; square dances, waltzes, two-steps. Brant was right in the thick of it, apparently having a grand time. And how the neighborhood girls sought for his favors! Judy felt pride. She also felt jealousy.

The gay crowd had brought refreshments, expecting the newlyweds to furnish nothing except coffee and the dishes. Time for the midnight supper, Judy eating with Brant as if all was very right and proper—she strangely silent and preoccupied, Brant talking gaily, making a hit with the shrewd ranchers, too, even if he was a city fellow! Mrs. Hargraves bustling about and boasting how she had been the first one to hear the news and to spread it. Darn her anyhow!

Then at last the merrymakers were gone. At last Judy and Brant were alone. He seized her shoulders roughly.

"Judy Forrest, what was back of all this?"

Judy shook herself free. "Please let me alone. I can't explain now. Perhaps I never can!" She ran to her room to hide her hot, shamed face in the pillow and let the tears run unchecked down her cheeks.

The bright July sun awakened her, for she had slept late, very late, when she had thought she could never sleep again. In the bare and rather forlorn living room she glanced through a window and saw that Brant's car was gone!

Her breath caught in her tight throat. So she must face the music all alone. Could she ever explain to Daddy and Mother? To the neighbors? She could hear tongues clacking, could see the sly glances, the pointing fingers. She couldn't, she wouldn't face this gossip. She'd go far away from this place. Away!

Writing a note for Mother and Daddy was the hardest thing she had ever attempted. It would take pages to explain, and she didn't want to explain anyhow. Finally in desperation she wrote:

> Dearest Daddy and Mums:
> I love you, love you, love you. But I must leave home.
>
> Judy

After this, Judy took, not the road past the HG Ranch where that horrid Hargraves woman and Tommy lived, but the Pass trail. At length Torchy, her pony, was climbing the steep slopes of the great mountain range when Judy heard a car roaring behind her.

Torchy snorted and turned aside as the car gained the crest of the ridge and stopped. A bare-headed young man, sunburned and badly bitten by mosquitoes and gnats, sprang out of the car. "Judy!" he cried, and lifted her from her saddle.

"Oh, Brant," she choked. "You—you followed me?"

"Yes. I found that I couldn't go away and leave you, loving you as I do, Judy honey! We'll make it real—that fake wedding and the charivari. And we'll buy us a real cow ranch and settle down. Shall we?"

She clung to him, all her cares and all her worries magically erased, erased by the power of love. "We'll make it real? You mean it, Brant darling?"

And the pressure of his lips on hers was the most reassuring answer he could have given her!

# Skyline Trail

## By L. Lindley Mulkey

***Like a hero in some fanciful tale of old, Boyd Hanley flew from beyond the horizon to Fran Taylor's range.***

BRIGHT SUNLIGHT flooded across low hills as Fran Taylor raced the snowy albino down the little valley and came to a stop at its end. Red-brown curls framed the girl's flushed face; sturdy cords and high-laced boots garbed her slim form. With studied concentration in brown eyes, Fran put the albino through his paces, walking on hind feet, kneeling, playing dead. An impressive repertoire. But Fran had promised Colonel Morehouse that White Arrow would be a "high school"

horse when he rode him in the Wagon-tire rodeo that fall.

"A nice exhibition," spoke a voice from behind.

Fran turned from the task of teaching White Arrow to pick up a handkerchief with bared teeth. A tall young man, wearing whipcords and leather jacket, stood at the foot of a small knoll.

"He's not for sale," stated the girl calmly.

The newcomer's eyes twinkled. Nice eyes, thought Fran, with an innate friendliness in their depths.

"Sounds as if you'd had some offers," he commented.

"About three a week. Whenever I see an hombre stalking across the range with a determined look on his face and admiration in his eyes, I know what he's got in mind."

"Need that admiration always be for a horse?" inquired the other gently.

Crimson banners waved in Fran's smooth cheeks. "It always has been."

"Then count this day an exception." Plainly the young man was enjoying her confusion. "I'm in the market for a phone, not a horse. My plane's grounded over beyond that rise."

It was then Fran noted the tiny pair of silver wings on the lapel of his leather jacket. A flyer! It developed that his name was Boyd Hanley, engaged in range seeding with a second-hand plane he'd picked up at auction two months before.

"A cantankerous old lady," Hanley chuckled. "I have to humor her a lot. But she scatters grass seed like nobody's business and I figure this job'll cover the cost of a new plane when I've finished."

Fran had heard of the government's plan to re-establish overgrazed rangelands by means of airplane seeding. But she hadn't realized the project extended this far north.

"There's a phone at my Lazy Q," she offered. "You'll see the buildings just beyond the bend in the trail."

"I'm not good at findin' my way around alone." Mock gravity marked the flyer's bronzed face. "You couldn't —er—personally conduct me to that phone?"

Fran's lips quirked, a dimple appearing momentarily. "Just follow the trail. You can't miss it."

"But I'm a sky rider, not a trail walker. If there's anything in this well known range hospitality. . . ."

"There is," laughed the girl, capitulating. "But some people take advantage of it."

Somehow the sunshine seemed brighter, the sky more heavenly blue, as Fran and Boyd Hanley strolled along the valley trail with White Arrow following. A magnificent animal, the albino. Slim-barreled, yet powerful. Every line of him, from arched neck to flowing silver tail, bespoke a royal lineage.

"First time I ever saw a pure albino," spoke Boyd Hanley, glancing back at the spirited horse.

"Pure whites are very rare." And then Fran was telling of the day three years before when she'd found a weak little all-white colt struggling in a sand pit and had taken it home to hand raise.

"From one of those wild hill bands, I reckon," surmised Hanley. "I often see 'em when I'm cruisin' over the breaks. Makes you a pretty valuable horse, I guess, with all those tricks he knows."

"He's not mine any more," said the girl. "Not since Colonel Morehouse offered three thousand and laid the cash on the line. It meant paying up a lot of debts and putting the Lazy Q in the clear."

"But you had other offers?"

"Dozens. But it wasn't only the money. Most of the would-be buyers were show people, who'd drag White Arrow from one end of the country to the other for what they could make out of him. But Colonel Morehouse loves horses; his Flying M's a regular horse heaven. He had to go East this summer on business and asked me to finish

training the albino, ready for fall delivery."

They had reached the little Lazy Q ranch house, with its trim outbuildings and pole corrals. In that moment Fran thrilled with pride of ownership, forgetting those times when loneliness lay like a pall on the little spread, when her feet yearned to dance with other young feet, when she longed for companionship other than that of old Paddy McGrew.

"Reckon there's another buyer for the albino," chuckled Boyd Hanley, as they reached the yard gate.

For the first time Fran noticed the two men who'd come from the Lazy Q barn and the two saddled mounts tied near the corral.

"I'll go down and talk to them while you use the phone," she said. "It's just inside the kitchen door."

As Fran continued along the path, she wished White Arrow were already in Colonel Morehouse's big Flying M corral, so she'd be finished with this matter of refusing would-be buyers. Some underground telegraph of the range had spread the Arrow's fame far and wide . . . his beauty, his spirit, his speed. Only last week there'd been a letter from a circus owner in Chicago. Others had come in person to the Lazy Q, their disappointment doubled upon seeing the Arrow.

The two men at the corral gate were patently father and son, possessing the same long nose and beady black eyes. Both wore shoddy range clothes, with lank dark hair showing below battered Stetsons. Their one difference was in weight, the father being heavy-set, the son of rangier build.

Dark eyes lighted as they took in White Arrow's high-flung head and the beautiful symmetry of shoulders, back and withers.

"Our name's Felton, carnival folks, showin' in Wagontire this week," spoke the older man. "We could use a good hoss act in our program." Is the albino for sale?"

Fran repeated the refusal which had become almost a habit. "Colonel Morehouse owns White Arrow now."

"Reckon he'd sell?"

"You'd have to ask him about that." Suddenly Fran became aware of the younger man's stare, taking her in from head to foot. There was something rapacious in those small close-set eyes, as if they saw below the modest neckline of her blouse. Color spilled into her cheeks, making them doubly lovely.

"Reckon we've come on a goose chase, Jud," spoke Snide Felton sourly. "We'll be gettin' back to town."

Without further words, the two mounted and rode toward the Lazy Q gate.

"A pretty pair!" Boyd Hanley had come down the corral path and stopped behind Fran.

"A pretty disappointed pair," shrugged the girl. "Did you get your call through?"

"I did that. They're sending me out some oil from Wagontire. It'll probably take an hour."

LL during the following week as Fran put White Arrow through his daily practise in the little valley north of the Lazy Q ranch house, she watched for Boyd Hanley's plane cruising back and forth across the range. Invariably, on passing, he dipped his wings in greeting. And Fran would wave back, her heart performing queer antics in her breast.

It was Wednesday afternoon that Paddy McGrew, man of all work on the Lazy Q, saddled a small bay so Fran could ride into Wagontire for the mail. The little cattle town flaunted a holiday air, with the traveling carnival's tent pitched at one end of the main street. Fran noted the outfit as she came out of the post office and wondered what part the Feltons, father and son, played in it.

Like all such wandering troops, they showed only in the evening, when folk from the surrounding hills rode in for

a bit of fun. Fran was about to swing aboard her bay and start for home, when she saw an old woman in faded gypsy dress come out of the carnival tent. Huge earrings dangled from her ears, but that which riveted Fran's attention was a big snake coiled about the woman's neck. The reptile lifted its ugly head, then slid like quicksilver along its bearer's arm. Fran moved closer, drawn by a sort of horrified fascination. The carnival woman looked up.

"You like my leetle pet?" she smirked with a grin.

Fran shuddered. "How can you stand it about your neck?"

"Ah, but ees he not a pretty necklace? See, how he glistens in the sun." The woman handled the snake deftly, to show off its colors. "But come. You shall see all of Tanya's pets."

"You—you're a snake charmer?" questioned the girl, a swift repugnance in her eyes.

"But yes. For many years Tanya have love the snakes and they also have love her." The old woman turned and lifted the tent flap. "Come. You shall see."

"Tanya!" snarled a masculine voice inside the tent.

The old woman stiffened, a swift fear in dark eyes.

"Tanya! Come here!"

"Wait," muttered the old woman to Fran, and disappeared behind the tent flap.

Fran hesitated, then suddenly came that same snarling masculine voice from inside. "You old hag! The only time people see them snakes is when they're payin' for it! We ain't givin' no free shows!"

A moment later Tanya reappeared, a sullen fear in wrinkled face. "Eef the leetle lady come back tonight, then will I show my pets," she mumbled.

"No thanks. You tell Snide Felton I've seen all of his show I care to." Without further words, Fran swung aboard her bay and heeled him swiftly down the street. Somehow the air seemed cleaner away from that shabby carnival tent. And to think the Feltons had wanted to buy White Arrow!

Fran's repugnance lasted until she reached home shortly before sundown. Old Paddy McGrew was puttering about the Lazy Q corral, brushing White Arrow's satiny coat and patiently waiting for supper. Paddy, Irish as the proverbial shamrock with his gray-streaked hair and turned-up nose, had been hired by Fran as man of all work, but had delegated himself her guardian as well.

"That there range seeder was here this afternoon," he stated, stretching a diminutive five feet four to comb White Arrow's flowing mane.

Color spilled into Fran's cheeks. "You mean Boyd Hanley, the flyer?"

"Yeah, I reckon. Leastways he was wearin' a pair of them little silver wings on his lapel."

A smothered pulse beat in Fran's throat. "What did he want?"

"Nothin' much. He hung around about an hour, watchin' me exercise White Arrow. Said to tell you he'd stop by in the mornin'." Old Paddy McGrew gave the albino's coat a finishing touch. "Jest how much d'you know about this here aviator, Miss Fran?"

Know about Boyd? Fran started to say that Boyd Hanley was the most exciting person she'd ever met, then changed her mind.

"Why—why, I know he has a government contract for range seeding and that he plans to buy a new plane with the money he makes." Fran paused. "What makes you ask, Paddy?"

"I dunno." The old Irishman kicked diffidently at a pebble. "It's jest that a purty girl, without no father nor mother to look after her, has to be kinda careful of strangers."

Paddy in the rôle of Mrs. Grundy! Fran wanted to laugh, but knew the old cowhand's concern was born of loyalty and affection.

"That's all right, Paddy. You don't need to worry about Boyd Hanley. Now turn Arrow into his stall and get

washed up for supper. I'll have it ready in a jiffy."

All in all it had been a disappointing day for Fran. First that annoying incident of the snake charmer and Snide Felton, and then being away when when Boyd Hanley had called. Perhaps Boyd had wanted to ask her to go to the big mid-summer dance in Wagontire next week.

Fran went to bed but not to sleep. The mid-summer dance! There was that pale green frock she'd sent for in the mail-order catalogue. It'd be here in time. Pale green brought out red tints in her hair and did something for her eyes.

FRAN was up with the sun. But Paddy, who bunked at the barn in a little room off White Arrow's stall, hadn't come in yet. Fran sounded the breakfast triangle a second time and, when the old man still didn't appear, went down the path toward the corral. It wasn't like Paddy to oversleep.

Fran reached the corral gate and then suddenly stopped. A groan sounded from over near the watering trough. The next moment she saw Paddy McGrew lying in, half out of the trough, with a crimson trickle of blood across his forehead.

"Paddy! Paddy!"

Fran worked swiftly, lifting the old cowhand and laying him on the ground. For one terrifying moment she thought he was dead, then another groan passed his lips. Fran rose and sped to the house, returning a moment later with a flask of brandy. A few drops forced between Paddy's lips and his eyes slowly opened.

"Miss . . . Fran . . . White Arrow. . . ."

"White Arrow!" A paralyzing fear struck the girl.

"Gone . . . stolen!" gasped Paddy, struggling for breath. And then as Fran forced more brandy between his lips, the old man gained strength for speech.

"I was goin' to bed last night, then remembered the water hadn't been turned off here in the trough. It was dark when I come out and I didn't see nobody around. But as I bent down, feelin' for the faucet, somethin' hit me from behind. I jest went numb all over. Then a flash o' white came through the barn door . . . but somehow I couldn't move or yell. Reckon later I passed clean out."

White Arrow stolen! And she'd guaranteed the albino's delivery in another month! She'd even spent the three thousand Colonel Morehouse had paid. These thoughts raced like fire through Fran's mind as she ran to the albino's stall. Empty! Paddy hadn't dreamed it all.

"Who you reckon it was, Miss Fran?" asked the old cowhand, pulling himself up with the watering trough for support.

"I'm not sure, Paddy. But. . . ."

Suddenly Fran stopped, remembering her interrupted conversation with old Tanya. Snide Felton had been in the carnival tent and no doubt had recognized Fran. Had he tried to insure her attendance at the night show in order to make the stealing of White Arrow easier?

"What is it, Miss Fran?" exclaimed Paddy, watching the girl's white face.

"That carnival outfit that's been camped in Wagontire! It was them, I'm sure!" declared the girl. "Snide Felton and his son were out here only last week, probably looking over the ground on the pretext of buying."

Fran had snatched her saddle from the corral fence and thrown it on the little bay she'd ridden the day before. "There's only one thing to do, Paddy, and that's to cut their trail before they get out of the country. They won't travel the regular routes, which means they'll probably follow down Sand Ridge and cross the alkali flats toward the San Simeon badlands."

"But, Miss Fran, you can't tackle them hombres alone! I'll go along."

"You're weaving on your feet, Pad-

dy, and in no condition to ride." Fran had already mounted, turning for a last word. "But you can make it to the house and call Sheriff Bronson in Wagontire. Tell him to cut down Goose Creek and meet me in the flats. We'll pick up Felton's trail there."

"Seems I ought to go along, Miss Fran!"

"No, Paddy! It's more important for you to stay here. Boyd Hanley'll stop by this morning with his plane. Tell him what's happened and ask him to cruise over the country between here and the San Simeons. He can spot White Arrow from the sky where it'd take a ground force a month in that rough country."

BEFORE old Paddy could remonstrate further, Fran set spurs to flanks and went racing through the Lazy Q gate. Old Paddy roused, brushing a gnarled hand across dazed eyes. Fran had said to phone to Sheriff Bronson and at the rate she was traveling, Bronson wouldn't more than have time to reach the flats and meet her. Paddy turned, then suddenly stopped, a slow stricture catching at his throat. There in the damp dirt at his feet showed a bright gleam of metal. The next moment he stooped and picked up a pair of tiny silver wings.

So it had been Hanley there by the watering trough last night. Hanley who'd cracked down on him from behind! Paddy knew a sudden cold rage. Hanley in cahoots with that crooked carnival outfit, playing up to Fran so's to give Snide and Jud Felton a chance to steal White Arrow! Probably that story about a government seeding contract was all hooey. And he'd come wingin' in this mornin', all mealy-mouthed and innocent, to further throw 'em off the track. But Hanley wouldn't be dealing with Fran this time. Hanley'd find Paddy McGrew and Sheriff Bronson waiting, with guns. Once they'd clipped that bird's wings, they'd soon catch up with his pals!

Sheriff Bronson was in his office when Paddy phoned. "What's that?" he shouted above the buzzing of the rural line. "That albino stole? I'll be right out. Hold everything!"

As Paddy hung up the receiver, his old jaw set implacably. He oiled up his forty-five, then went out to the front porch where he could watch down the section line road for the sheriff. It was a clear morning, bright and fresh, with dew sparkling like jewels on the meadow grass. Yet Paddy McGrew saw none of it, his thoughts being too engrossed with what lay ahead. Boyd Hanley, Snide Felton and Jud Felton. A dirty trio of scoundrels who'd plotted to hornswoggle a fine girl like Fran!

And then all at once Paddy McGrew stiffened. There came the powerful hum of a motor overhead as Boyd Hanley's plane zoomed into sight, making for the little valley north of the house. So Hanley had come to call on Fran again! With an alacrity born of fury, the old cowhand hitched up his gunbelt and set out on the valley path.

The flyer was coming in for a landing, skimming over the smooth ground. He brought the plane up into the wind, then glided to a stop. Paddy, rounding a last bend in the trail, saw Hanley climb from his cockpit as the propellor lost momentum.

"Somethin' sort of romantic about them flyers," the old cowhand mused grimly. "Reckon Fran couldn't help fallin' half in love with him."

Boyd Hanley was striding swiftly down the trail, with wind lifting dark waving hair. Handsome. Even old Paddy McGrew must admit that, yet it detracted nothing from his determination.

"Stop right there, Hanley!" he snapped, forty-five whipping up. "And start reachin' for them clouds."

"Paddy! What in hell!" Boyd Hanley froze, gray eyes wide. "Why all the gunplay?"

As if he didn't know! Hanley was sure a good actor all right. No wonder he'd taken Fran in!

"I'm holdin' you prisoner, Hanley,

leastways till Sheriff Bronson gits here."

"Prisoner! Well, I'll be hanged!"

"You will be, all right!" snapped Paddy. "'Less you loosen up mighty quick and tell Sheriff Bronson what them pals of your'n have done with White Arrow!"

"The albino! What—"

"As if yuh didn't know he was stole last night!" growled the old Irishman caustically.

"Stolen!"

"You know damned well he was!" snapped Paddy, patience at an end. "And you needn't act so carnsarned innocent! What's more, if any harm comes to Miss Fran while she's trackin' down them Felton coyotes, I'll settle with you myself, law or no law!"

Boyd Hanley's gray eyes narrowed. "You mean Fran's trying to catch up with White Arrow?"

"Exactly!" snapped Paddy McGrew. "And if you think you'll git a chance't to warn Snide and Jud Felton, you're mistaken. Sheriff Bronson'll be here any minute to take you into Wagontire. And you'll stay right there in jail till we git White Arrow back!"

Boyd Hanley suddenly straightened, gray gaze fastened on a point beyond Paddy McGrew's shoulder. "But there's Fran and White Arrow now!" he exclaimed. "Just rounding the corner of the Lazy Q corral!"

Paddy McGrew turned and in that moment a hundred and eighty pounds of corded sinew struck him. Paddy's gun exploded harmlessly into the ground, then for the second time in twenty-four hours he went out like a light.

A horse and rider pounded through the Lazy Q gate, leaving a plume of dust in their wake. Sheriff Bronson! Swiftly the flyer picked up Paddy McGrew's limp body and dumped it into the rear cockpit of his plane. A quick turn of the switch and propeller. The engine roared. Hanley slipped into the pilot's seat and the next moment was skimming across the valley in a clean take-off. Higher and higher the plane lifted, circling the Lazy Q buildings, then zooming westward out of sight.

WHEN Fran left the Lazy Q, she headed toward a low line of hills that lay like blue haze along the southern horizon. Here the country became rough and broken, with scrub juniper and pine covering the higher slopes.

Two miles farther on the hills merged into the alkali flats, a shimmering old lake bed from some prehistoric age. Here a vast unwrinkled sheet of gray alkali dust recorded every track left by man or beast and spread them like a pattern for all others to read. Fran cut a wide circle across the flats and finally found what she was looking for. Wagon tracks, accompanied by two ridden and one led horse. They came into the flats from the north, yet at a different angle than she, herself, had followed.

Fran cast a swift glance in the direction of Wagontire, but there was no sign of Sheriff Bronson. Perhaps he hadn't been in his office when Paddy phoned. In which case, she'd better ride on in order to cut down the Feltons' lead. When Sheriff Bronson reached the flats, he'd see where her tracks merged with those of the carnival outfit and follow pronto. Any Westerner could read that sign with his eyes shut.

Fran knew she was making good time, grimly overhauling the more cumbersome outfit ahead. The bright sun wheeled like a golden disk across the sky, topping the zenith, then dropping toward the west. Still Fran kept on, prodding the little bay to faster pace. Now and then she glanced backward along her trail. But when afternoon shadows lengthened across the hills, there was still no sign of Sheriff Bronson.

The tracks of the carnival outfit showed fresh now. Fran knew they

couldn't be more than an hour ahead. Her firm little chin set as she pulled her sixgun from its holster and made sure it was fully loaded. Dusk overtook the girl in a shallow valley, cut by deep arroyas. Snide Felton and his outfit were still traveling west, straight toward Mule River ford, beyond which they'd be safe in the San Simeon badlands.

For years those badlands had been a favorite hiding place for thieves and rustlers. There were countless hideouts, tiny springs in oasis-like ravines, where a small gang could hole up indefinitely, so well hidden they need not fear the law.

Darkness came down swiftly, yet still Fran kept on. And then suddenly she jerked the bay to a stop. Some distance ahead, through screening trees, she caught the glimmer of a campfire. The girl's heart began to race. She couldn't tackle that camp alone. But she might slip up under cover of darkness and secure White Arrow while the others slept!

Fran tied her bay among scrub junipers and crept forward, the pounding of her heart a clamor in her ears. The top of the covered carnival wagon showed against a dark backdrop of trees. Between it and the fire moved old Tanya, busy at supper preparations. But that which riveted Fran's gaze was Snide Felton at the front of the wagon where White Arrow and two other horses munched grain from nose bags. Felton, busy with paint can and brush, was covering the Arrow's beautiful white coat with drab gray!

Fran's lips tightened. So that was why the outfit had risked a campfire this first night. Felton needed its light to effect that camouflage! From a distance, or the air, White Arrow would soon be just another horse, his coat blending with surrounding rocks and brush.

A good thing she'd discovered Felton's trick, thought Fran. She started to turn, but suddenly a hard blunt object prodded the small of her back.

"Lift 'em!" hissed a voice, as a hand clamped on her gun.

Fran froze. So intent had she been on Snide Felton that she'd forgotten about Jud.

"Come along!" the latter chuckled exultantly, pushing her toward the fire. "Hey, Pa! Look what's caught up with us!"

Snide Felton jerked erect, pale eyes flaring. "So!" he spat. "You alone, girlie?"

"She's alone," snickered Jud. "I been scoutin' round the camp like you said. Finders keepers, eh, Pa?"

Fran swung around, brown eyes blazing. "You don't dare keep me prisoner!"

"Who's a-goin' to stop us?" sneered Snide Felton. "Reckon we'll turn you loose to bring the law after us?"

The girl was about to flare back, to tell him that Sheriff Bronson was following her, that tomorrow Boyd Hanley's plane would be scouring this country from the sky. And then she clamped small white teeth into lower lip. Better to keep still; better to submit peaceably and wait.

That night she lay in the wagon box, one wrist linked to old Tanya's, the other to the heavy wagon wheel. Fran slept but little, her thoughts busy with the morrow and that moment when Sheriff Bronson or Boyd Hanley would discover the carnival outfit traveling toward the badlands. Even with White Arrow camouflaged, Boyd would investigate and signal their location to Bronson.

It was noon of the following day that the Feltons halted in a deep arroyo, with old Tanya making coffee over a little oil stove in the back of the wagon. Not since that first night had Snide Felton risked a fire.

While they were on the move, Fran rode in the wagon, jolting over rocks and ruts. But at meal time she was allowed to walk about and help old Tanya, under the steady surveillance of Snide and Jud Felton's eyes. There was something in the latter's envelop-

ing stare that sent a chill through Fran's heart.

"Thanks, sweetheart," he whispered once, as she handed him a cup of coffee. "You 'n' me are goin' to git better acquainted once we hit the badlands."

Fran's brown eyes hated him, while a swift fear wakened in her breast. Why hadn't Sheriff Bronson come? Or Boyd Hanley?

A sudden staccato hum broke through the girl's thoughts. A plane! Those others in the camp had frozen to attention, all eyes fixed on the sky. And then the plane circled into view, sunlight glinting on silver wings. Tears started in Fran's eyes; her throat ached. Boyd! She'd know that old crate anywhere!

Swiftly the plane came on, flying fairly low. Did she dare signal Boyd? Fran caught at the bright scarf about her throat. But in that moment Snide Felton's pale eyes met hers.

Fran's hand dropped. It didn't matter, she thought. Boyd couldn't fail to see them. Now he was at the upper end of the arroyo. And now directly overhead. Fran watched breathlessly for that dip of his wings, his invariable greeting to her. But that signal did not come. The plane continued on a steady even course, passing overhead and on toward the southwest.

Boyd hadn't seen them! Or if he had, he'd figured the covered wagon and horses were some sheepherder's camp. The girl turned and saw Snide and Jud Felton exchange a cryptic satisfied glance.

AN overwhelming worry claimed Fran as the outfit once more got under way. Yet surely Boyd would come back! If he didn't. . . . But Fran thrust the thought away.

All afternoon they jolted over the rough trail, stopping at dusk for supper. Snide and Jud Felton tended the horses while Tanya lighted the little oil stove. Fran watched with bleak despairing eyes. All at once the old woman turned, pointing to the little tank on the stove, then to a five-gallon oil can in the wagon.

"Empty. You fill," she said gutterally, setting her box of matches on the tail-board of the wagon.

The girl rose to obey, lifting off the stove tank and unscrewing the cap on the five-gallon can. And then suddenly every nerve in her body tightened. Out of the southwest came the unmistakable hum of Boyd Hanley's plane! Fran's heart leaped, then sank like a leaden weight. If Boyd couldn't see them at noon, he'd never spot them in the dusk!

A moment and the plane would be overhead. Suddenly an idea leaped full-formed into Fran's mind. She dropped the oil tank, its contents gushing forth upon hard shale. A match next, from that box on the tail-board! A swift rake against the iron wagon wheel and Fran cast it, blazing, into the spilled kerosene.

A column of flame exploded upward into the dusk. Fran scarcely felt Snide Felton's fingers biting deep into her arms, scarcely heard his curses. Her face was tipped up, eyes straining to catch Boyd's dipping wings, signaling that he'd seen. But that wing dip did not come. For the second time that day, Fran watched the plane sail swiftly out of sight.

Crawling hours of darkness. Sleeplessness. Despair. Fran, lying with her wrist linked to that of old Tanya, shuddered at the thought of the morrow. By noon they'd reach the Mule River ford. Once across it, she must resign herself to Jud Felton's love-making, with its ultimate hateful climax. One against three. She was entirely at their mercy.

Snide Felton roused old Tanya at dawn. Twenty minutes later the outfit was again moving forward. Fran felt beaten, whipped, swaying there atop the wagon seat. If only she had her gun . . . could die quickly, cleanly. But Jud Felton carried it in his belt, a mute symbol of his power.

It was mid-morning when the outfit

reached Mule River, a shallow sluggish stream winding between steep sandstone bluffs. Beyond lay the San Simeon badlands, mysterious, sinister. Mile on mile they stretched, disappearing in distance. Snide Felton's face wore a satisfied grin. Holed up in those hazy canyons, he could take his time about disposing of the albino. As for the girl, well, Jud needed a wife.

As the wagon moved down a steep cut to the ford, something in Fran seemed to wither and die. Paddy and Sheriff Bronson had failed her! But that which hurt most was Boyd. She'd been so sure, so certain he'd come when she needed him! In that moment all life seemed as ugly as those bleak ravines beyond Mule River's murky waters.

Jud Felton spurred up beside the wagon. "Nice place over there to honeymoon," he leered. "Nice and—"

He didn't finish for suddenly a voice cracked through the midday quiet. "Lift 'em, you scum! You're covered!"

Fran's agonized gaze jerked upward. There on the bluff above the ford stood two grim figures. Paddy McGrew and Boyd Hanley! Jud Felton went for his gun. But in that moment Boyd's forty-five spat fire. Jud slumped from his saddle even as Snide's and old Tanya's hands lifted. And then Boyd was leaping down the bluff, disarming and tying the Feltons, while Paddy kept them covered from above.

"Fran!"

Boyd, there at the wagon wheel, reaching up. And then suddenly Fran was in his arms, her slender body shaken by sobs. Boyd carried her down to the water's edge and gently bathed her flushed tear-wet face.

"You're all right, dear? They didn't hurt you?"

"No, no," choked the girl. "Oh Boyd, I thought. . . ."

"That I didn't see you yesterday noon and last night?"

"You—you didn't dip your wings."

"I was afraid to signal and maybe warn those varmints. Better to take 'em by surprise." Boyd smoothed back Fran's red-gold curls tenderly. "You see, after I kidnaped Paddy. . . ."

"Paddy!"

"Yeah," chuckled Boyd softly. "Old Paddy got the idea it was me who'd conked him there by the Lazy Q watering trough. He even had Sheriff Bronson primed to nail me when I landed. But when he said you'd gone out on White Arrow's trail, I knew there wasn't any time to waste in jail, tryin' to convince 'em of my innocence."

"But Paddy!" exclaimed Fran. "Whatever made him—"

"He found those little silver wings of mine there by the watering trough. But when I got him up in the air, I talked some sense into him. I'd lost those wings in the carnival tent, when I took in that show night before last. Reckon Snide Felton found 'em."

"And planted them there by the trough!"

"He probably figured on killin' two birds with one stone," surmised Boyd. "You see, Felton had tried to talk me into joinin' his show, do stunt flyin'. But after I met you that day in the valley, I didn't want to leave the range till I knew if—if I had a chance."

"A—a chance, Boyd?" whispered Fran breathlessly.

"To sign you on as co-pilot . . . for life, sweetheart."

Fran's misty eyes and trembling upturned lips were Boyd's answer, an answer that was rudely interrupted by Paddy McGrew.

"Hi, Boyd! Here comes Sheriff Bronson, straight on the course you laid him. Reckon we can turn this outfit over to him now."

"Good!" Boyd answered. Then to Fran: "That leaves you and me free to take the skyline trail home, sweetheart. My plane's in a little flat downstream. Will you sign on?"

"Oh, Boyd! Will I?" whispered Fran, once more surrendering soft lips. And this time there was no interruption.

# Cowboy Lore

*Leaves From a Cowboy's Sketch Book*

## By Walt Mead

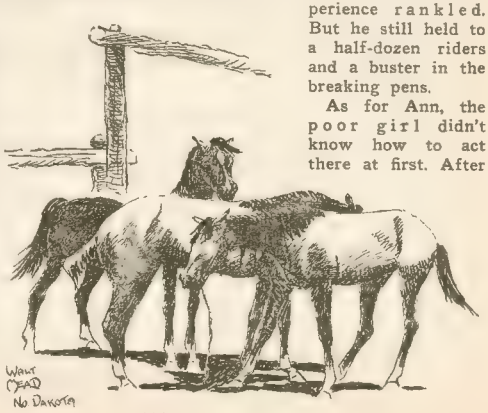
### *Prairie Girl*

HER name was Ann Reilly, but at some of the community gatherings they called her Little Annie Rooney. A pretty little thing she was, with wavy brown hair and the dancing blue eyes of the Irish; and always laughing, even at herself. Just a mite of a thing, too. One hundred and five pounds of happiness. For all her twenty years she was really nothing but a child, and so poor that a little gingham dress from the dust-covered racks of Clay Bank's dilapidated general store looked to her like the gown of a fairy princess.

Her family were hard pressed to make ends meet, with eight hungry mouths to feed and all. The drought had taken its toll and the family were clinging desperately to what little they had left. It seemed to have hit them harder than most; as is the way with some families, anything they turned their hand to seemed never to pan out just right. Misfortune stalked them at every turn.

Then fortune smiled upon Ann in the buxom form of Mrs. Davis who really wore the trousers for the Two Dot outfit. She needed a girl through the busy season, and Ann was so breathless with excitement and the prospects of earning some money of her own that she could scarcely accept above a whisper. Five whole silver dollars a week! Only they called them cartwheels then. Why, that could buy a girl like Ann almost all the beautiful things in the whole world, including the two-dollar gold-tinted locket and chain that had been gathering dust for months in Clay Bank's forlorn general store window.

So Ann packed her few paltry belongings in her mother's battered old cardboard suitcase and went to live in the big, rambling white house that overlooked the Yellowstone and which Old Man Davis had built, when, as he put it, "He was in the chips." He was far from being poverty stricken even now, though Mother Nature had whittled him down some and the experience rankled. But he still held to a half-dozen riders and a buster in the breaking pens.




As for Ann, the poor girl didn't know how to act there at first. After

sleeping three in a bed, as was the case at home, suddenly having a big spacious bedroom all to herself proved too much even for a girl with her happy disposition. She cried herself to sleep the first night—tears of happiness mingled with a goodly slice of homesickness as well. Even a dugout can be home.

It was only natural that Ann should come to know Jeff best, who was working the breaking pens. He often strolled up the path leading to the house for a cup of coffee, leaving several three-year-olds in the corral to chew on snaffel bits with a chance to think things over. Jeff had a way with horses, and some said with women, too, though I don't know about that. At least he was handsome and dashing enough to stir the hearts of most women, I thought.

He'd been places, too. Mexico, the Argentine and had even cowboyed some over in Hawaii. He knew all Alaska, and mining, to hear him.

Mrs. Davis sniffed at that one and remarked, "I never knew a cowpoke to do a hard day's work in his life." Jeff, quite unabashed, made it clear that it had been something of a lark at the time and, he "wasn't lookin' fer work, leastwise not a shovel job?"

Mr. Davis, in the background as usual, would often look upon Jeff's empty cup after he had departed, and remind Martha that some day she might be a mite too flip with the fellow and he'd up and quit. To which Mrs. Davis would reply: "Let him! The woods are full of horse fighters." But she knew otherwise.

It was all very thrilling to Ann. Her face would go all pink and her eyes shiny when she poured his coffee. She even mustered up enough courage to ask Mrs. Davis if she might try her hand at a two-layer chocolate cake. Jeff had made the remark that it was really the only kind of cake he'd ever given a rip for. Reminded him of his mother, he'd said.

She'd been watching him work his youngsters from her prim perch on a top rail, when he'd said it, with his head tilted back in that challenging way he had, his eyes crinkled in a smile. And Ann had blushingly told him that it was her favorite cake, too.

Jeff kept right on with his work and his coffee, and Ann continued to please Mrs. Davis with her culinary, though it didn't take a sharp woman like Mrs. Davis to see how events were shaping up. Quite well she knew what was going on in the girl's heart.

No one claims to know to what lengths the courtship of the bronco-

buster might have gone. Even Mrs. Davis was left in doubt. In fact things happened so suddenly that it was several days before people could adjust themselves to the fact that Jeff was gone, and apparently for a long time. At least that's what the grim-looking man with the star had said would likely be the case, though he didn't state specifically the reason. And no one asked him.

# Wyoming Señorita

## By Marie de Nervaud

*THE STORY SO FAR:*

*DOLORES DE RIO ALCADERO DEL REY, with her maid, MARÍA, has come from southern California to stay with her uncle.*

*BILL GRANBY, crippled but mentally vigorous owner of the Double Bar X in Wyoming. She straightway meets and likes*

*ROY PELGREN, owner of the neighboring Lazy Nine. Roy has been depressed because color blindness has barred him from the air corps and because his girl, BESS HUGGINS, jilted him for a lieutenant; but knowing Dolores sends his spirits soaring.*

*All is not well on Wyoming range. A sabotage ring is systematically destroying cattle. Bill Granby is bemoaning his helplessness when his son, JERRY, who is on the wild side, comes home drunk and announces that PIKE, the foreman, is also drunk—in the Howling Coyote Saloon in Hurricane Gap.*

*Unknown to her uncle Dolores starts for Hurricane Gap after Pike. On route she eludes three men whom she overhears plotting against the Double Bar X. Sending Pike off to the range, she then heads for the sheriff's office to report what she had heard, but is interrupted by*

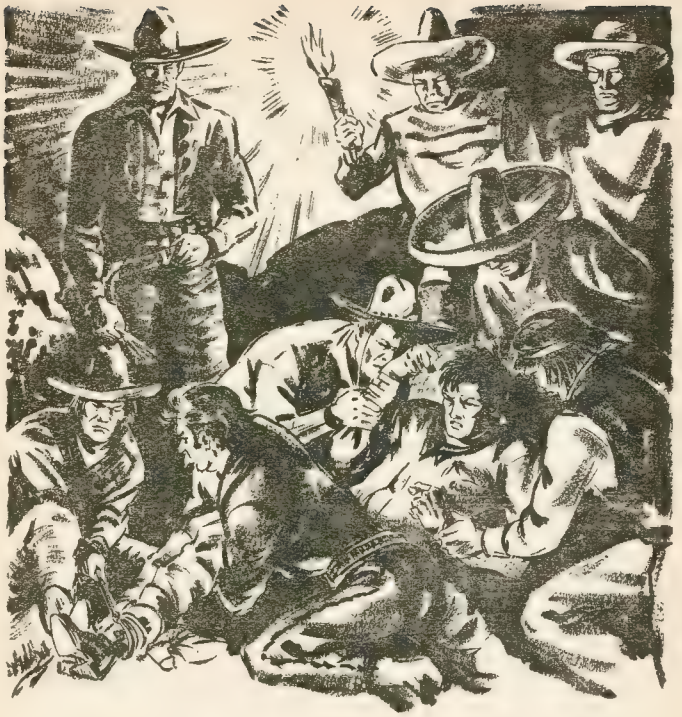
*ART SAMPSON, the town banker, with, of all people,*

*DIEGO ORIETRA, her fiancé from Spanish California. Diego locks her up in a hotel room and plans to force her to accompany him home, but Dolores escapes and again listens in on a conversation—this one between the men she met on the range and Art Sampson. She realizes they are all in the sabotage ring, and so probably is Diego. She hurries to the sheriff's office, but before she can tell her story to the deputy there, a local tough barges in. He kills the deputy, steals papers which are evidence against the ring, knocks Dolores out and so arranges things that the signs will point to her as the murderer.*

*Roy learns that Dolores is absent from the ranch and rushes to town after her. He finds her in the jail, just coming to. Roy and*

*SHERIFF TOM CRAWFORD listen to her story and, fantastic as it sounds, even the sheriff believes her. Yet he knows he hasn't enough evidence to arrest Sampson, so he, Dolores and Roy rig up a scheme to learn more from the banker.*

*Sampson is persuaded to drive Dolores home to her uncle's ranch, and on the way she cleverly allays any suspicion he might have that she has linked him to the plotters she met on the range. They are interrupted by Bess Huggins, now a widow and after Roy again, telling Dolores to keep away from her man. After Bess tears on, Sampson starts making love to Dolores. Distasteful as this is, Dolores plays up to him until they reach the ranch, but is unable to learn much from him.*



*Roy and Dolores now realize they are madly in love and plan to be married the next day. Meanwhile Roy rides off to his range and Dolores, her uncle and María all take much needed naps. While the girl is sleeping in the porch hammock, Diego Orietra creeps up, dopes her with a hypodermic needle, and absconds with her to southern California. When she comes to she finds herself driving with Diego along the southern California coast. Realizing once she is home her stern Spanish father will never let her see Roy again, and that in any event Diego must be thwarted in his traitorous plans, she wrecks the car. Both Diego and Dolores are thrown out onto the sand of the Pacific beach.*

### Part Five

### CHAPTER XXIII

*Where's Dolores?*

BILL GRANBY'S exhausted nerves kept him in a stupor of sleep until supper time. He was finally wakened by the persistent shaking of a brown wrinkled hand and María's shrill voice.

"Go way! Vamouse! *Avanti!*" He opened one eye and glared at her, then

shook himself wider awake at her terrified expression.

"What in hell's the matter now?" he growled, getting himself hoisted up on one elbow. He wrinkled his forehead trying to make head or tail of the torrent of Spanish, then straightened in alarm as he caught on to the main theme of her tirade.

"Gone? Dolores isn't here? My God, I wish that girl would stop pulling a disappearing act! Shut up! For God's sake, let me think!"

His final yell brought María to a trembling silence, but she still kept her imploring hold on his arm. A blind instinct to save himself from a repetition of the scenes he had gone through last night with María made him calm his excitement and hide his own alarm.

He nodded reassuringly, *"Sí, sí! Bien—sí, sí!"*

María drew a long breath and asked a question, which he gathered to mean did he know where Dolores was.

Again he nodded with a soothing, *"Sí—sí mañana—"*

The terror went out of María's eyes, and she gave a great sigh of relief. Bill motioned her to go back to the kitchen and let out a stentorian call for Jerry.

María shook her head, shrugged, and threw out her hands. *"Nadie! Nadie!"*

"Not back yet, eh?" Bill Granby frowned but still motioned María away. When she had finally backed out of the room, he let out a relieved, "Whew!" and settled back on his pillows to review this new development.

*"Nadie!"* He muttered an echo of María's last word. "That must be nobody. Reckon that means Pike hasn't showed up either. Damn it all! I'm hanged if I'll spend another night alone with that screeching hyena!"

A gleam of common sense broke through his despairing rumble of oaths. There was no point in letting himself get in the state he had been in last night. Dolores had said the sheriff was coming out. He had showed up evidently and wanted her to go in town with him. She had probably left a note somewhere.

He was about to shout for María, then stopped himself. No sense starting that up again! If he got the idea across to her that he wanted her to look for a note, she'd fall to the fact that he didn't know where Dolores was, and the screeching would begin all over again.

Once more Bill gave way to a picturesque vocabulary that ranged from curses on himself for not having a telephone, to curses on Jerry and Pike for not getting back. Reverting finally to the one sensible solution, which was that Dolores had gone to town and left a note that he couldn't find until Jerry or Pike or some of the outfit came back to get him out of bed, Bill resigned himself to his inevitable rôle of inaction.

He ate the supper María brought him, then dropped off to fitful sleep. By the time morning came and there was still no sign of Jerry or Pike, Bill's philosophic resignation had about reached the end of its rope. He motioned to María to put down the breakfast tray she brought him.

"Hi! Get me out of this damn bed and into my chair!"

To his grateful surprise, María proved to be stronger than she looked. By the process of much gesticulating, hauling and pulling, she managed to get him into his chair.

"Now, bring me that tray on the porch. I'll wheel myself out!"

María nodded her understanding, picked up the tray, and went out ahead of him. Bill wheeled his chair through the living room, eagerly scanning every possible place where a note might have been left.

Acute disappointment swept over him at not finding any, but he resolutely reasoned himself out of the growing anxiety that beat on his brain. It couldn't be long now before Dolores would show up! Or somebody he could send after her, if she didn't.

He was just finishing his breakfast

when the welcome sound of hoofbeats came from the pines. Another minute and a slender rider in blue jeans could be seen winding through the trees.

Bill's "Thank God," changed to an ejaculation of dismay as the girl came out into the open and headed for the house. Bess Huggins! What in hell was bringing her here?

Instinctive caution narrowed Bill Granby's eyes as Bess pulled her sweating horse to a halt. He had never had much use for Bess, and had less than ever since she had thrown Roy over.

She made no effort to dismount, but called an excited, "Hi, Bill! Where's Dolores?"

Bill's eyes narrowed still more. "She's not here right now. What do you want her for?"

"Not here?" Bess was plainly startled at this news. "Where is she?"

"Search me!" Bill studied her nervous excitement. "Gone off for an early morning ride, I reckon."

"Which way did she go? I'll ride out and meet her."

"She might have taken any of a dozen trails." Bill was anything but helpful. "What's the excitement? What do you want her for?"

"I—I've got to see her!" Bess was obviously nonplussed at this turn of events. "I—" she hesitated, then started to dismount. "I'll wait for her."

"Make yourself at home," Bill said dryly. "It'll probably be a couple of hours or more."

"Oh, I can't wait that long." Bess burst into a gasping little sob. "A terrible thing has happened, Bill. Roy has had an accident. I—I don't know what happened, but I found him there at the Lazy Nine! He's delirious and keeps calling for Dolores! I—I'm afraid he might die if she doesn't come to him! Will you—will you tell her the first minute she gets back?"

"Wait a minute!" Bill's first start of distress at this news was quickly superseded by suspicion. "I don't see where Dolores comes in. She hardly knows Roy."

"That's what you think!" Bess flashed out, then leaned forward in her saddle, her eyes filled with tears, and her breath coming fast. "I'm going to be frank with you, Bill. I know you and all Roy's friends have it in for me, but I've paid for what I did. My husband was killed, and I've come back to Roy. I don't believe he really loves Dolores, but he's got a crush on her. All that's beside the point now, though," she ended wildly. "Dolores has got to come to him! I flared out at her yesterday, but she isn't the kind to hold that against me. You'll tell her to come to the Lazy Nine, won't you? Tell her to come as fast as she can make it!"

"I'll tell her what you say," Bill Granby answered, his face a non-commital mask. "Sure you won't wait and see her yourself?"

"I must get back to Roy." Bess let another sob break through, then wheeled her horse and made for the pines.

For sometime Bill Granby stared at the spot where she had last disappeared. "Just what is she up to, I wonder?" he mused, uneasiness surging up in him at this new situation. "That whole story sounds darn fishy! I'm hanged if I'll pass it on to Dolores."

A groan broke off the soliloquy. When was he going to have a chance to pass anything on to Dolores? Or to keep anything from her, for that matter?

María's sudden appearance brought an almost welcome diversion from the groaning anxiety of his thoughts. He made out from her excited questioning that she wanted to know how soon Dolores would come, now that *mañana* was here. He gave a soothing string of "*Sí, sí's*" that he was far from feeling and finally managed to get rid of her.

Again the morning silence fell heavily around him, to be broken at last by the distant clang of the ranch gate being shut, and the chug of a motor. The fervent, "Thank God!" that escaped Bill's lips as he recognized the sheriff's

flivver through the trees was no empty phrase.

Weak with relief, he moved as the car came toward him, then fear gripped him once more. Why wasn't Dolores in the front seat with Tom?

"Where's Dolores?" he cried. He had to repeat his hoarse question twice before he could make the sheriff hear.

"What's that?" Tom Crawford stopped short, one foot on the ground, the other on the running board.

"What did you say?"

"My God! I said, 'Where's Dolores?' Didn't you—"

"Where's Dolores?" the sheriff echoed. "What do you mean? Isn't she here?"

With one bound he was up the steps. "Do you mean to say she isn't here?" He ripped out an oath. "That puts me on the spot, all right! So, she's vamoused!"

"What the hell are you talking about?" Bill Granby roared. "She hasn't vamoused. Something's happened to her! I thought of course that she'd gone back to town with you yesterday afternoon."

"Yesterday afternoon!" It was Tom Crawford's turn to roar. "She's been missing since yesterday afternoon? Why didn't you—"

"Wait, Tom—wait!" Bill breathed heavily and put his hand to his heart. "It isn't going to help to yell! We'll only have that María on our necks! Let me get this straight. Didn't you come out here yesterday afternoon?"

"I couldn't make it," the sheriff answered. "I told Dolores I expected to come but then I got delayed. At all events, I had the word of honor of this precious niece of yours that she wouldn't leave the ranch until I did come! This morning I got the report on the gun. Those were her fingerprints, all right. Not that I think she was the killer," he added at Bill's stricken look. "I don't. But it'll be a hell of a job to prove it. Especially if she's run away."

"She hasn't run away, I tell you!" Bill Granby declared. "If she gave you her word she would stay here, she would stay! I'd stake my life on it! Tom, there's foul play here! What—"

A yippee cut him short. Both men turned to see Roy coming pellmell down the slope of the north pasture.

"My God! I knew all the time she was lying!" Bill ejaculated.

"Who was lying?" the sheriff demanded, but before Bill could answer, Roy was charging up to them with a joyful, "Where's Dolores?"

## CHAPTER XXIV

### *Gone*

IT SEEMED to Roy, as he came up at a hard gallop, that years must have passed since he last saw that ranch house porch. Ever since the moment yesterday when he had turned to wave a farewell to Dolores, emotion and a heady elation had flamed through him, quickening him to an intensity of living he had never known before.

The sheer surprise and wonder of the fact that Dolores actually loved him as he loved her keyed him to high exhilaration. It wasn't all fairy tale, this business of love at first sight! It could strike you out of a clear sky, as it had struck him. As, thank Heaven, it had struck Dolores.

Every minute of these strenuous hours that Roy had passed since he left her had been permeated, waking or sleeping, by dreams of her. On first getting back to the Lazy Nine, he had made himself snatch a few hours of much needed sleep. His last waking thoughts had been the incredible realization that the next time he went to sleep in this room, Dolores would be beside him.

The glory of this thought vied with the glory of the sunset as, once more in the saddle, he raced across the mesa to the meeting place Slim and he had agreed on. Twilight had been deepen-

ing as he had finally caught up with the milling herd. It had been hard to pull his thoughts back from the intoxicating subject of Dolores, but Roy had felt a deep thankfulness as he saw his cattle safely down from the upper range.

Slim had accepted Roy's congratulations with a satisfied grunt. "Reckon we're safe for one while! I hope the Double Bar X outfit has had as good luck as we have."

"How about my going over to see if they've made it down from the upper range?" Roy had suggested, and Slim had readily fallen with the idea.

"Sure, we're all set now. I'm sending one of the boys back to the Lazy Nine tomorrow. Maybe, if the Double Bar X is still havin' trouble, we could spare him to help 'em out. I take it you'll be stickin' around the ranch for a while?"

Instead of the bitterness that this remark would have brought to Roy a few days ago, a glow of happiness had radiated through him.

"Yeah, I'll be sticking around," he had gloated. "I've got to go to town tomorrow morning, but after that you'll find me right at the Lazy Nine, for better or worse!"

Slim had stared at Roy as he had given a happy guffaw at his secret joke. Roy had continued to chuckle over it, off and on, after he had left Slim and started for the Double Bar X Ranch. Slim would get the surprise of his life, all right, when he came back to the ranch!

Good luck had stayed with Roy all that night of hard riding. He had guessed fairly well about where the Double Bar X herd would be apt to be, and Pike's welcome had been a heartwarming reminder of the new and close connection between the two ranches.

"Golly, Roy, but I'm plumb glad to see you! I was hopin' like hell that someone would show up, so's I could send word to the Old Man that we're O.K. Another two hours and we'll have the herd all safely down on the lower range. I was too short-handed to send any of the boys back, but you can tell Bill we're practically out of danger."

"I'll be glad to," Roy had answered, then asked, "Has Jerry showed up?"

"Jerry?" Pike's disgusted grunt had been answer enough. "I got troubles a-plenty without addin' Jerry to 'em."

Roy was thinking of this now, as he rode up to the house and saw the flivver and the sheriff. He hoped Jerry wasn't in a mess.

He pulled his horse to a halt and was about to call out again for Dolores, when he caught the expression of the two men on the porch waiting for him. In a flash he was out of the saddle and up with them.

"What's the matter?" His heart sank with sickening premonition. "What's happened to Dolores?"

"Nothing, we hope." Bill's groan was anything but reassuring. "Pipe down, Roy! Don't get that damn María excited."

"Tell me, Bill!" Roy's tense low voice begged. "Where is she?" He looked belligerently at the sheriff. "Don't tell me you've run her in!"

"We don't know where she is," Tom Crawford began. "She was here yesterday afternoon."

"Yesterday!" Roy exploded. "For God's sake don't tell me she's been gone since yesterday, and you've done nothing about it! What are you doing here?" He turned fiercely on the sheriff. "Get going!"

"Where?"

The sheriff's solemn question froze Roy in his tracks as he was about to leap for his horse. Coldly, Tom Crawford added, "Just what call have you, Roy, to be taking charge in this high handed—"

"What call have I?" Roy cut off his question with a hoarse anguished croak. "Didn't Dolores tell you?" He looked wildly at Bill.

"Tell me what?"

"We were planning to get married this morning! She can't be gone, Bill! She can't!" He turned fiercely on the

sheriff, "Where's Art Sampson, Tom? Have you checked up on him? My God, why did you ever—"

"Art Sampson!" Bill Granby managed to produce a roar out of his stupefaction, then lowered his voice with a nervous glance toward the kitchen. "What in hell would Art Sampson have to do with it? And what do you mean, 'married'! Are you crazy? Or am I?"

"I will be if we don't do something about—"

"Now hold your horses, Roy!" The sheriff put a restraining hand on Roy's arm. "Suppose we get this straight. We're not going to gain any time by going off half-cocked! You say you and Dolores had planned on getting married today. Kind of sudden, wasn't it?"

"Ever hear of love at first sight?" Roy demanded. "Well it was that way with us! I figured the sooner Dolores had the protection of a husband, the better. And I was right! My God, I'm going to town to see—"

"She didn't spend last night there," the sheriff broke in. "I know that, at least, not at the hotel. As to Art Sampson, I met him early this morning going to the station. He said he was off on a two weeks' business trip."

"And you let him go!" Roy exploded.

"Just how could I have stopped him?" The sheriff asked angrily, but Roy drowned him out.

"Don't you see, he might have kidnaped Dolores? He might have her hidden away somewhere, and he was establishing an alibi with you. Why didn't you have a deputy follow him!"

"Let me get a word in!" Bill Granby roared. "Why do you keep harping on Art Sampson? Just because he brought Dolores home—" he broke off with an excited exclamation. "By golly, seeing you two has driven Bess Huggins clear out of my head. I'll bet there's a clue there."

He broke into an account of Bess's sudden appearance and of her yarn about Roy. "She was trying to get Dolores away from the ranch!" He ended excitedly.

"Let me get this!" Roy's voice had a steely ring. "Bess said I was delirious and calling for Dolores? Why—" After a moment's musing he broke in with an impatient, "There's nothing to that!" Just Bess up to her tricks! She has it in for me, and she probably cooked this up to embarrass Dolores by getting her over to the Lazy Nine, then get even with me by spreading the word that she found her there."

"I don't think Bess would have been so excited at not finding Dolores if that had been all there was to it," Bill Granby disagreed. "She was plumb thrown off her keel. I got the feeling she didn't want to leave a message with me, but that she didn't know what else to do. There's a clue there, I tell you!"

"I'm not wasting any time with Bess's monkeyshines!" Roy said decisively. "My hunch is that we've got to track Art Sampson." He turned to the sheriff. "It's O.K. to tell Bill the whole story now, isn't it?"

Tom Crawford hesitated, then slowly nodded, "I reckon it is." In as few words as possible he told Bill the part of Dolores' story that he had made her promise to keep secret. "I thought it was safe enough to send her out with Art, so she could try to pump him for more evidence we could use against him. Especially with Roy riding herd on them! My God, I'll never forgive myself, if—"

"Never mind about forgiving yourself," Roy broke in. "What are we going to do? You can telegraph ahead and see if Art got off at any station, can't you? He's well enough known."

"Unless he was equipped with some disguise, which I wouldn't put past him," the sheriff was beginning, when he broke off with a startled, "Hello, who's this?"

They all turned to see a horseman come out from the pines. He apparently glimpsed the sheriff's flivver, almost threw his mount with a sudden jerk to his haunches, then rightabout

faced and made for the shelter of the woods again.

"It's Jerry!" Bill exclaimed, but not before Roy had done his own recognizing of the flying figure. Even before Bill had the words out, Roy was off the porch, in his saddle and giving chase. It was a matter of minutes only when, by a clever outflanking movement, Roy caught up with Jerry and grabbed his horse's bridle.

"Let go!" Jerry's voice broke on a high adolescent squeak. "Let go, I say! I'm not going to see the sheriff! I'm not—"

Still holding the horse's bridle with one hand, Roy reached out and caught Jerry's upraised arm with the other. "What do you know about Dolores' kidnapping?" he shot out.

"Dolores! Kidnaped!"

Even Roy had to admit that the horror and surprise in Jerry's echo were genuine. The color drained out of the boy's face, and his brown eyes grew round and terrified.

"You come back and come clean with anything you know." Roy dropped Jerry's arm, his mouth grim and his eyes hard. "It's damn well time you ran into the sheriff!"

He made no attempt to answer Jerry's hysterical questions, but, his hand still on the bridle, brought both horses back to the porch at a fast trot.

"I have a hunch Jerry can give us some clue about Art Sampson," Roy declared sternly, his hand on Jerry's arm as they came up onto the porch. "Spill it!"

At the mention of Art Sampson's name Jerry sagged. Abject terror was in his voice as Roy jerked him relentlessly forward.

"No! No! I don't know a thing about Art Sampson! I—" His eyes grew wild with the sudden memory of what Roy had said about Dolores; words which, obviously, had been driven out of his head by his subsequent fright. "Dolores!" he gasped. "You don't—you don't really think she's kidnaped?"

"What do you think?" the sheriff's voice was like the lash of a whip. "She promised to stay here. And she has been missing since yesterday afternoon. If you had been home, instead of—"

Jerry cut him short with a wild sob, "Don't! I'll tell everything I know—everything. If Art Sampson has done anything to Dolores I don't care what he does to me! I'll tell everything I know!"

## CHAPTER XXV

### *Jerry Comes Clean*

"GET some brandy in the cupboard in the living room!" Bill Granby's voice was tragic in its depths of despair, but steady as a rock. He put a hand on Jerry's arm, where the boy had collapsed in a chair beside him and was sobbing hysterically. "I'm standing by you, Jerry," he went on, "no matter what you've done. But you've got to come clean, son, right from the beginning. It may lead to our finding Dolores."

Some of Bill Granby's strength seemed to flow into Jerry, and he made a desperate effort to control himself. He gulped down the brandy Roy brought him, shuddered, then threw back his head and looked straight into his father's eyes.

"I'll come clean," he said. "Art will kill me—or worse—but I don't care!"

It was a sordid story, the beginning of Jerry's association with the sabotage ring, and the faces of Roy and the two older men grew even more grim as they listened. Tom Crawford made notes from time to time of what Jerry was saying, his excitement growing until he could no longer hold it in.

"By God, I've got enough here to get Art Sampson without needing any girl to testify about recognizing his voice! You needn't worry about what he'll do to you, Jerry. I'll have him in a good

safe place, until he's sent to a safer one!"

"When you catch him, you mean!" Roy reminded him grimly. "Go on, Jerry. Do you know any hide-outs they might have taken Dolores to?"

"I've just come from their principal one," Jerry answered. "She wasn't there last night, that's one sure thing. When I heard the sheriff was coming out here," he threw a frightened, sidelong look at Tom Crawford, "I reckoned I'd better 'light out. Ever since I heard Bronc Kenyon had been caught with those papers on him, I've been about crazy. I knew Joe had given those papers to Bronc, when Joe decided to vamouse. If the sheriff had read them I knew, too, my goose was cooked all right, because my name was there in connection with last week's raid." He gulped when he saw his father wince under these words.

"I know," he went on miserably, "I know how you feel, Dad. But by playing in with Art, at least I was saving our herds. They would have gone the way of the rest, if I hadn't."

"How do you figure that?" his father asked.

"Why, Art Sampson himself, when he got me in to this, promised that the Double Bar X herds wouldn't be raided! He said I was protecting you by playing in with him, not only now, but later. He said I was carving out a big future for myself when he and his ring took over the cattle industry of the country after the war was over."

"Oh, he did, did he?" The sheriff growled, "And you swallowed that?"

"You'll have to swallow it, too, before long!" Jerry retorted, a flicker of spirit showing through his abject despair. "You're all living in a fool's paradise, figuring the U. S. is going to win this war. Art Sampson is smart enough to know we can't win it, and he has lined himself up with the ones that are going to come out on top. After the Axis has beaten Europe and Asia to a standstill—and Art has inside information that it won't be long now!—we'll have to do things their way. They've got key men all picked out to take over the different industries in this country. Art Sampson will handle all the cattle ranges in Wyoming and Montana, and those of us who have helped him will be—"

"The damn swindling liar, filling kids up with stuff like that!" Bill Granby's rage burst all bands of control. "I'd like to get my two hands on him!"

"Shut up, Bill!" The sheriff ordered tersely. "What more did he say, Jerry?"

"He said helping to end the war quickly was being more patriotic in the end than dragging it out. He said the sooner there wasn't enough for our Army to eat, the sooner they would stop fighting. He said—"

"I don't give a damn what he said!" This time it was Roy who broke in. "Where's Dolores? My God, every minute we're talking—"

"You're right," the sheriff agreed. "If you'll just be patient a minute, I'm coming to that. Who was in the hide-out, Jerry? Anyone?"

Jerry's face got even paler, if that were possible. "Yeah," he groaned. "Bronc Kenyon was there. He"—a shudder ran over him—"they gave him the third degree for being caught with those papers on him."

"They said if Cal hadn't got the papers back—" Jerry clapped his hand over his mouth with a stricken realization of what he had given away. "No, he didn't say that!" he cried wildly. "He didn't say that! I'm getting mixed. He said—"

"Never mind making anything up, Jerry." The sheriff's eyes gleamed. "You've given us the name of the killer of my deputy. Now go on!"

"I haven't!" Jerry sobbed, but his father's stern voice cut off his rising hysteria.

"Do you want us to find Dolores? What else did Bronc say?"

Dolores' name had a bracing effect on Jerry's break in control. "I'll do any-

thing to find her!" he gulped, then forced himself to go on with his story. "They went farther than they meant to with Bronc, I reckon. He was in too bad shape to go with them, so they left him there. By golly!" Jerry's eyes started wide open with sudden blazing excitement. "I remember now, Bronc did say he overheard Art and Joe talking after they thought he'd passed out. He said they had a special fancy job on hand. He started to tell me something about it, then gave me a funny look and shut up. I'll bet you he heard them talking about Dolores!"

Roy was hauling Jerry to his feet before he had stopped speaking.

"Come on! Get going and take us to that hide-out!"

Roy shouted to María, who came hobbling out the door, gazing from one to the other of the newcomers with terrified eyes.

*"Bien, bien!"* Roy soothed, in answer to her shrill cry of *"Mía señorita?"*

*"Bien,"* he repeated, forcing a smile. "Got coffee? *Cafe?"* He pointed to Jerry, "And *pan! Pronto!"*

"Get some bread and coffee in Jerry, Bill," Roy added, as María made for the kitchen, "while Tom and I bring up some fresh cayuses. At last we've got something to go on!"

There was little time for talking in the next few hours, while the three men pushed their horses to the limit in their race against time. Jerry stood up under the strain better than Roy had expected.

"You don't think the kid is leading us on a wild-goose chase?" the sheriff had asked once, motioning Roy to fall back for a minute.

"The thought of Dolores' danger will make him play straight," Roy answered positively. "He fell for her the way the rest of us have." His voice was harsh and strained. "Nothing but her disappearance would have made him come clean about Art. I'm sure of that."

"Reckon you're right," the sheriff nodded. Once more Roy and he streaked up beside Jerry, urging him to greater speed.

"Suppose Art has come back?" Jerry asked once.

"That'll suit me fine," the sheriff answered grimly. "I've got a sixgun for the beginning of that interview and handcuffs for the end of it. How much further, Jerry?"

"Another half-hour or so," Jerry pointed to a distant spur. "We round that and come into the canyon from this end. It runs straight through and comes out the east side, so you can reach it from Hurricane Gap, too. Having two exits makes it mighty convenient."

When at last they reached the landslide of shale, they left their horses and started the climb. Fifteen minutes later they were up and heading for the cleverly hidden entrance of the cave.

"You go alone, Jerry, in case anyone else is there," the sheriff whispered. "Roy and I will wait here where we can listen in to what Bronc says to you."

"Look!" Jerry paused miserably. "Am I puttin' a noose around Bronc's neck?"

Tom Crawford shook his head. "He'll have to pay for his folly, just as you will. Both of you being such kids, though, I'll see it goes as easy as possible with you. Coming clean with what you know will count in your favor a whole lot."

Jerry nodded, straightened his shoulders, and pulled back the pile of brush.

A groan greeted his "Hi, Bronc!" then a surprised oath.

"You back so soon? What's up? Did you run into Art or Joe?"

"Art?" Jerry echoed. "I thought you said he was heading for Montana?"

"That's what he thought. But he got double crossed somewhere along the line. The dame didn't show up."

The sheriff grabbed on to Roy just in time to keep him from dashing into the cave at this unforeseen announcement.

"What dame?" Jerry asked.

"Hell, I might as well tell you!" Bronc let out an oath. "Why should I help that torturing Sampson bully to get what he wants? Art's got his eye on that California cousin of yours you were telling me about!"

"How do you know?"

Roy and Tom exchanged a glance of approval at Jerry's well acted excited surprise, then strained their ears to hear every word.

"I wasn't sure when you were here before." Bronc went on. "I knew Art was after some dame, and when you was telling me about the Spanish beauty, I kind of put two and two together. But I figured there was no use stickin' my neck out, so I kept mum. I'm ready now, though, to throw a monkey wrench in Art's scheme."

"What in hell are you getting at?" Jerry demanded.

"Like I told you, I overheard Joe and Art talkin' when they thought I'd passed out. Joe was trying to persuade Art to let the girl wait until they'd got the raids finished, but Art was plumb burnin' up with romance. He had it all figured out so he'd be as safe as a church. It appears there's a girl named Bess who has it in for Roy. She was crazy-headed enough to do anything to get even—especially if it got this other dame off the range. So Art put her up to getting the Spanish baby away from your ranch this morning, and then Joe and Art were going to nab her.

"Art had it worked out foxy enough to make a point of havin' the sheriff see him on his way to the early train, and tellin' him he was goin' off to Montana on business for a couple of weeks. Then he was to rig up one of his disguises, board the train and get off at the next flag station, where Cal would be waitin' with a horse for him." He laughed again, breaking off with a curse of pain.

"Go on!" Jerry added his own curse.

"Well, Joe and Cal were here since you left. The dame never showed up! Joe's fit to be tied, because Art won't give it up, but swears he'll get the girl tonight. Joe and Cal went to tell the other fellows the raids are off for a couple of nights. God, but I'd like to catch Art Sampson in a trap!"

"So would I!" Jerry agreed excitedly. "We—"

"And so would I!"

Bronc gave a frightened curse at the sheriff's voice and sudden appearance in the mouth of the cave.

"What's more," Tom Crawford added, as Bronc stared at him in speechless stupefaction, "we will!"

Bronc came out of his stupor to burst into shrill hysterical curses at Jerry for bringing the sheriff there.

"Shut up, Bronc!" Tom Crawford ordered. "It's the luckiest thing that ever happened to you that Jerry did bring me to this hide-out. We're taking you into town with us, see? And then we're going after Art Sampson. But one thing I want clear, or it will go mighty hard with you. Is this the truth, what you've been telling Jerry about Art's plans for kidnaping Dolores. And is it true that so far, he has failed to do it?"

"It's true as far as I know," Bronc stammered. "I only know what Joe and Cal told me, but I don't see why they'd make up such a yarn for my benefit."

"They wouldn't!" Roy charged in and joined them, he winced as he saw the state of Bronc's feet, then added excitedly, "Where—"

"Let me do the questioning, Roy!" the sheriff broke in curtly. "You and Jerry keep still while I get this straight. You say, Bronc, that Art plans a kidnaping tonight?"

"That's what Joe said. There was no doubting that Bronc was telling the truth.

"O.K." Tom Crawford waved Roy and Jerry toward the opening of the cave. "I want to talk to you two outside."

Once there, he motioned them away.

"I don't want Bronc to hear us!" He led the way out of earshot of the cave. "You're a prize dumbbell!" He turned

scornfully to Roy. "Just because you're in love with Dolores, you don't have to lose all your wits! I don't want a soul to know Dolores has disappeared. I want Art Sampson to come there tonight to the Double Bar X for her."

"And what's happening to Dolores in the meantime?" Roy groaned. "I don't give a damn about Art Sampson! I want to know what could have happened to Dolores if Art hasn't carried her off! My God, we can't just wait—" He broke off suddenly, staring at something bright on the ground under a thicket, then made a pounce for it.

"My God!"

He straightened up, his face drained of color, his hands trembling as he held out a small, gaudily colored match box. It was smashed down at one end, but still had in it tiny wax tapers.

The sheriff took it curiously. "What's that?"

"Don't you see?" Roy's voice was scarcely recognizable. "There are only two places you can buy those wax matches. Spain or Mexico. Diego is the one who has kidnaped Dolores!" His face hardened to an iron, expressionless mask. "I'm going after her."

Tom Crawford seized his arm as he started away from them. "Wait a minute, Roy! You don't know—"

"I do know," Roy's voice was as expressionless as his face. "Diego is the only other answer, if Art Sampson and his gang are clear. Diego's taken her back to California. I am going after her."

## CHAPTER XXVI

### *Spanish Californian Hospitality*

THE next forty-eight made Roy feel that he had aged a corresponding number of years. From the moment that he left Jerry and the sheriff and plunged to the trail, every-

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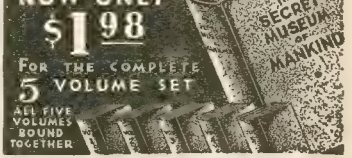


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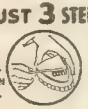

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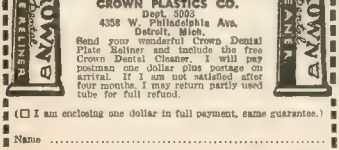


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thing had gone completely haywire.

He could hardly remember reaching his horse and heading for Hurricane Gap. His whole being had been headed for one thing, molded to one purpose. There had been room for neither feeling nor thought beyond that one "must." He must get to that remote Spanish California where Dolores had been spirited away from him.

In Hurricane Gap he went to the bank and drew out all the money he had. In the two-hour wait before he could get a train to the nearest airport, he tried to raise a loan on his herd, but with the scare about raids, there was no one to take him up on it.

Once on the train, no longer able to resort to action in an effort to deaden thought, Roy fought hard to put down his fears and lay his course calmly. Diego had about twenty-four hours headstart. Roy tried to put himself in Diego's place to gauge his probable procedure. A car would be the best bet for getting Dolores away. Driving day and night, Diego could reach the Monterey coast by tomorrow morning.

Roy calculated next his own possible time of arrival. If he got a plane soon after the arrival at the airport, he could be in San Francisco shortly after midnight. He could hire a car, and with luck be down in that region about the same time Diego got there.

But there was no luck! At the airport he met the devastating news that weather reports over the Rockies were unfavorable, and all flights had been canceled.

Never in his life would Roy forget that hideous night of indecision. Every hour or so it was reported that the weather might clear, and the planes take off. If he abandoned the idea of flying, it would take him an endless time to get there by train!

The last straw came when at last the planes did begin to take off, in the morning. Because of the delay, all Army officers who had been waiting had

the right of way over civilians. In helpless rage, Roy could only wait his turn. Instead of midnight Wednesday, when he had hoped to reach San Francisco, it was midnight Thursday before he got there.

Again the nightmare of delay went on. Because of the tire shortage, no automobiles were for rent for such a trip. After hours of search, Roy bought a second-hand car, and started down the coast.

At the restaurant where he stopped in Monterey, he was given directions as to how to reach the Alcadero del Rey ranch, but the waiter was even more specific with warnings to stay away.

"It's a hot bed of fifth column down there," he explained in answer to Roy's questions. "Those old Spanish families have never admitted they were part of the U. S. A. We're still gringos to them! Germans have come up there from Mexico, and there are plenty of Japs who slipped down there before the great move away from the coast began. Just last week, there was an attempt to dynamite the one road that leads down there. They may have succeeded since then. We don't get too much news up here about what's going on. The sheriff is fit to be tied trying to keep an eye on things down there."

Roy wolfed down his food, listening with only half an ear to the warnings. As time went on, all the outside world became more and more of a blur to him in the intensity of his fears and longing for Dolores.

"Thanks!" He nodded and paid his bill. "I reckon I'll push down as far as the Big Sur, anyway."

On and on, impervious to the gorgeous scenery, to the massive cliffs and the sparkling expanse of the Pacific, Roy pushed his way. Excitement rose in him as his speedometer told him he was nearing his goal.

About thirty miles more, according to what the waiter in Monterey had

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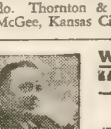
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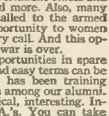

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said, and he would reach Dolores' father's ranch. He cast an uneasy eye to the west, where the sun was about to sink beyond the watery horizon. He would have preferred to arrive by day light, but . . .

The curious formation of a rocky point ahead caught his eye, and he gave a sudden "Whew!" at the sharp pitch the road took beyond it. Speeding along the level stretch by the beach, he was speculating on the width of that narrow ribbon flung up against the stupendous cliffs, when a great burst of smoke puffed up to be followed by the incredible sight of the road itself bursting into the air. The next second came the deafening detonation of the explosion.

Roy came to a stop, gazing in incredulous stupefaction at a second burst of smoke and rock and dirt. There was a second thundering roar; then silence, broken only by the gentle lapping of the waves on the beach beyond the dunes that lined the road.

Shaken and still convinced that he must be dreaming, Roy got out of the car and walked a short distance down the road.

He had the feeling that the jagged, gapping crater pitted into the cliff, where a moment before a road had been, must be a mirage. But the boulders that continued to detach themselves from the edges of it and crash into the ocean below dispelled this hope.

It was real! A section of the road was gone, blown up before his eyes! The words Dolores had repeated that she had overheard in the hotel bedroom flashed to his mind. "Right now things down there are in a mess," Dolores had reported Art Sampson as saying. She had gone on with something about a dynamite scheme. . . .

Even while he was remembering, Roy was running back to his car, in feverish haste. He must get down to where the road started the ascent of the cliffs, then he would have to forge his way

on foot behind that now impassable wall of granite.

Bitterness at the further delay drove all thankfulness for his narrow escape out of his mind. Heaven only knew how far he dared push through this wild unknown country at night! He would probably have to make camp in one of the canyons, if his hope of skirting around to the back of this first rocky promontory and meeting the road again proved futile.

With a groan, Roy headed his car around one of the dunes on the left of the road and drove it behind a cluster of the gnarled pines. There he locked it and abandoned it, plunging at once up the shallow opening of a canyon that widened out to a sandy triangle with a thin trickle of water flowing to the ocean.

The going at first was easy, following up the creek bed, but as the twilight deepened, the canyon narrowed to a seemingly impenetrable jungle of tough manzanita bushes and heaped boulders. After taking a header or two on the slippery stones, Roy was forced to accept the inevitable. To push on at night was the wildest folly! It would net him nothing but possibly a broken leg, if not a broken neck.

Realizing that it was too risky even to try to retrace his way back to the car, he picked out a fairly level spot by the creek and prepared to spend the night. The exhaustion and strain of the last two days made him relax in spite of himself.

Stretching out, Roy looked through the maze of leafy branches above him. Here and there the light of a star penetrated and brought him a momentary comfort. Those same stars were shining on Dolores. At least he was within a few miles of where she must be! Though Diego had kidnaped her, she was better off than she would have been in Art Sampson's hands!

Panic pierced through Roy at the thought of the few hours he and Dolo-


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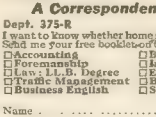

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res had actually known each other. Suppose it all seemed a dream to her! A wild bit of unreality that would fade away once she was back in her own environment!

Memory of Dolores' lips against his, of the look in those deep eyes, banished his sudden fear. It wasn't time that counted, when a man and woman came together as he and Dolores had.

The hypnotic rhythm of the wind through the trees and the soft enveloping darkness lulled Roy's tired nerves to a doze and then to deep sleep. How long he slept he never knew, but all his life he was to remember his awakening.

Through his troubled dreams, flares of light brought him to half consciousness and an excited foreigner jabbering completed the shattering of his rest. He tried to sit up, but found he could not move, nor could he see anything through the blinding light that he stared into.

A sharp commanding voice said in Spanish "Let him speak! But first tie him securely!"

In spite of Roy's struggles against the many hands holding him, he was rolled on one side, and his wrists and ankles were securely bound with harsh horsehair riatas. He was then jerked to a sitting position with his back against a tree. Before him he saw a striking looking older man in black riding breeches of a curious cut, a black embroidered bolero sort of jacket, and a broad black sombrero that kept his eyes and forehead in deep shadow.

With him were several *vaqueros* who stopped their chattering at the older man's peremptory gesture, and stood back respectfully, watching with excited beady black eyes while he spoke to Roy in slow, stilted English.

"What do you do here, in this canyon?"

Roy's impulsive desire to say it was none of his business gave way to better judgment at the expression of the

stern, hard mouth which was all he could see of the older man's face.

"I am on my way to the Alcadero del Rey ranch," he answered.

There was a quick exchange of excited glances between the *vaqueros*, but not the least flicker of any change of expression in the face of their leader.

"And why are you going there?"

Roy hesitated, while desperate alternatives raced through his mind. The supposition had already come to him that this man might be Dolores' father himself. On the other hand, it might just as well be Diego's father, or one of the other of the ranch owners down here who were in with the sabotage ring. Not only his own safety but that of Dolores and Heaven only knew how many more might depend on the answer he gave.

"I have news from *Señor* del Rey of his daughter, Dolores," he said finally, his eyes fixed on that straight, uncompromising mouth.

There was still no shift of expression, no change in the voice that asked, "What news?"

"That is for *Señor* del Rey," Roy's heart gave an excited leap as he took a daring plunge. "Are you, by any chance, the father of *Señorita* Dolores?"

Again Roy was aware of the excitement running through the *vaqueros*, but if the *Señor* shared it, he gave no sign, as he replied,

"I am asking questions, not answering them—*Señor*."

The sarcasm of that *"Señor"* brought home to Roy how he must look. For days now, he had not had his clothes off, nor had he even had a chance to shave since that far away morning which he had so joyfully anticipated as his wedding day. His momentary confusion gave way to a quick burst of rage at the ignominy of his position, blurring caution and common sense in a gust of anger.

"The Spanish Californian hospitality seems to be mighty different from what it's cracked up to be!" He glanced from his bound wrists and ankles back to the black line of shadow through which he could feel if not see, keen, suspicious eyes studying him. "Where do we go from here?"

The *señor* made a brusque gesture of decision. "We will go, I think, where you will receive still more of our Spanish Californian hospitality!"

He spoke in Spanish, but Roy was quick enough to catch the trap that was being laid for him. He would be in a far better position to find out what was what, if they thought he did not understand any Spanish.

He presented a blank face and growled a disgusted, "I don't get that lingo! Say it in U. S. A."

The *señor* repeated what he had said in English, then gave a brusque order in Spanish to the *vaqueros*.

Once more Roy felt himself mauled by many hands. At least he had the satisfaction of hearing curses of pain as the *vaqueros* tried to dodge his thrashing about, and left him. A glancing blow and a stab of pain at the back of Roy's head put an end to his struggles, and, as far as he was concerned, to him, for the time being.

*(To be concluded in the next issue)*

IN THE NEXT ISSUE

# Up Across Texas

*Beginning a new serial of the tough old trail-driving days*

By CLEE WOODS

# OUT OF THE CHUTES

## WITH TEX SHERMAN

*Editor's Note: Tex Sherman, who gives you rodeo news hot off the griddle, is personally acquainted with performers and producers from coast to coast. Have you any question you'd like answered about any particular rodeo or contestant? Write Tex Sherman in care of Ranch Romances, 515 Madison Ave., New York. Be sure to enclose a stamped, self-addressed envelope, and Mr. Sherman will send you a prompt reply.*

*The rodeo's on, folks. Here they come, "Out of the Chutes" and into the arena, Tex Sherman announcing!*

WORD has just come through that Buck Jones, famous cowboy star, has died of the severe burns he received in the Coconut Grove fire in Boston. On the night of the fire Buck was at a banquet in his honor given by his friends of the stage and screen in the night club that proved a death trap for so many.

Before entering pictures, Buck was one of the top bronc-riders in the old 101 Wild West show, before rodeo put these shows out of business. Until the death of Tom Mix, Tom and Buck used to stage an annual rodeo at their grounds in Saugus, Calif. Now others will have to take up where these two grand old-timers left off. We will all miss Buck, his friends in the rodeo world and his fans throughout the country.

Frank Moore, taking a well earned rest with his wife out in Los Angeles, reports that, contrary to rumor, the Madison Square Garden rodeo in New York will positively be staged next year.

At the Thanksgiving Day party of the Horse Patrol of the U. S. Coast Guard, at which yours truly was a guest, Charley Barnes gave a swell exhibition of trick roping that was one of the high lights of the party. Charley is well known in his home state of Georgia, where he stages many rodeos, including those at Waycross, Macon and Atlanta. Now he's planning some Sunday rodeos in Hollywood and Fort Lauderdale, Fla., and other cities near where he expects to be stationed for the duration. J. B. Hubbard, one of rodeo's top-hands, has agreed to ride broncs and bulldog steers. The other boys will be from Florida's cattle country.

Hubbard is now stationed in Miami in the Horse Patrol and will likely be sent to one of the outlying posts between Miami and Jacksonville. He's already been given a rating because of his knowledge of horses, and may be placed in charge of one of the barns.

The Tioga Hospital in Waverly, N. Y., has been getting plenty of business from the JE Ranch. It not only took care of the last days of our beloved Uncle Herb Maddy and Slim Welch, but it is the induction station for future cowboys and cowgirls. Among those who entered the world via the Tioga Hospital are the cowgirl daughters of Junior Eskew and Jim Reaves. And lately a brand new cowboy arrived, the son of Mr. and Mrs. Lou Randolph. Dennis Carson Randolph is the future bronc-rider's name. His dad has been announcer for the JE outfit for several years.

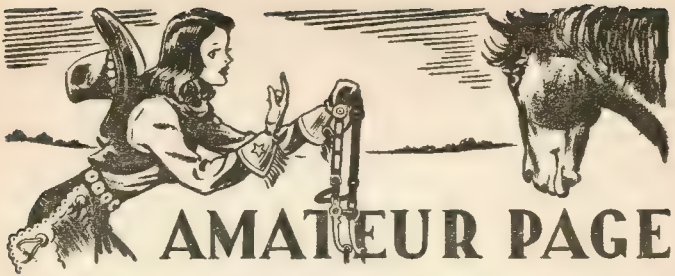
Colonel Jim Eskew of the JE says he'll have some important news to release shortly, but doesn't want to give out about it until the contracts are all signed. And Ray Wheelock, director of the JE's famous Indian Band, is rumored to be in the Army and stationed in Miami. Do any of you know whether this is so?

Eddie O'Neill, rodeo roper and clown, has quit the game for the duration and taken a job as bridge tender in Rockaway, N. Y. And the news has just reached me that he was recently married, but kept it quiet from the cowboys. My guess is that his reason was that antic custom the boys have of "chapping" the bridegroom. Good luck, Eddie, you're safe now. All the chappers are trying to chap the Japs.

Frank Biron, the former champion trick rider and roper who has been running a dude outfit in New Jersey, has been called into the Army. He's sold his bucking stock, but Mildred Myers, who has been associated with Frank in business for many years, will run the dude outfit until Frank comes marching home. Mildred, you know, is a former bronc-rider and a darn good one.

*Adios,*

*Tex Sherman*



# AMATEUR PAGE

*This page is made up of original pieces of cartoons, verse or prose pertaining to the West, written by our readers. Our only requirements are that the persons submitting material be amateurs and that all material be original with the person submitting it. For each contribution published we shall pay the writer (or artist if it is a cartoon) two dollars. More than one contribution may be submitted by any one person.*

*Address all contributions to The Amateur Page, Ranch Romances, 515 Madison Ave., New York. No submissions will be returned, nor can we enter into correspondence regarding them.*

## Bashful Joe

HE was just a bashful cowpoke
And a little bit homely, too,
But when it came to punchin' cows
There wasn't much he couldn't do.

He could cut a calf out from the herd
And hogtie it just like that,
Then slap its owners brand
On its hide in nothing flat.

He could ride the toughest bronco
Or bulldog the wildest steer,
He could draw his gun like lightning
Or yodel loud and clear.

But when it came to women
This cowboy was a wreck,
So his pals said he needed a wife,
And they'd marry him off, by heck.

But when they'd introduce him
To a girl upon the street,
He'd just get red and stammer,
"There's a fella I've gotta meet."

The boys drove him frantic
With their affairs for his heart
Till the boss's pretty daughter
Stepped in and took his part.

She was gay and friendly
And always very kind,
And when he'd blush and stammer
She didn't seem to mind.

So soon he learned to love her,
And then they asked her pa.
Now he makes those boys step,
'Cause he's the boss's son-in-law!

*Veda Marie Voss, Willow Island, Nebr.*

## Out of the Frying Pan

MY father, sheriff of Pensco County, was hated and feared by every outlaw in the West, but his most deadly enemy was Matt Garson, a notorious killer. When Garson robbed the bank in Pensco and left a note daring Dad to come and get him single-handed, Dad took up the challenge. But although he didn't know it, the men in Pensco formed a posse to ride after him.

My brother, Benny, and I were alone on our ranch the following morning when Dad pounded into the yard, badly wounded, with Matt Garson and another hombre close behind him. As he collapsed at my feet before the kitchen stove, I saw why he had tried to outrun them, instead of shooting it out. His right hand was blown to bits!

Snatching Dad's gun from its holster, Benny challenged Matt Garson and his pal as they rode into the yard. They laughed loudly in reply, and it was plain to see that they were coming in after Dad. Benny raised the gun and pulled the trigger! A look of amazed fury spread over the face of Garson's pal, and he tumbled backward just as Garson sent a bullet into Benny's body. As he fell, he whispered, "Don't let him get Dad, Sis." Then he lay still.

Matt Garson stood looking down at Dad as he lay unconscious on the floor. Slowly he raised his gun. In the distance I heard the sound of many horses. The posse was coming, but it would be too late to save Dad. It was left for me to stop him. I seized a pan of hot grease that was sizzling on the stove and dashed it into Matt Garson's face! He gave one agonized scream, and I fainted!

Both Dad and Benny recovered, although both were badly wounded. Matt Garson

and his pal were buried up on boothill. Whether I killed the man or whether he was shot by a member of the posse arriving a few minutes later is a question I have never asked. You see, I don't want to know.

*Mrs. Mary Alice Brown, Albemarle, N. C.*

## Pegleg Pete

I'D like to sleep beneath the stars
And listen to the coyote's howl.
But I'd rather sleep in a nice warm bed
And listen to a tomcat yowl.

I'd like to go on a roundup
And ride and ride and ride,
But I'd rather sit beside a fire
And warm my tough old hide.

I'd like to drink my coffee from an old tin can
But I'd rather have a cup,
I'd like to be a lion tamer
But I'd rather tame a pup.

I thought about being a sea captain
And sailing a stormy sea,
But in the old tin wash tub
There's water enough for me.

I thought about marrying the widow
And settling down for life,
But I guess I'll just be a bachelor,
I don't want no gosh-blamed wife!

*Edith Beeman, Riverside, Wash.*

## Arena Dust

ONCE more they're fixing up the gear,
Ten-gallon hats and boots;
Once more there comes the ancient cheer
As buckers leave the chutes.

Once more beneath an April sky,
The snaky mustangs glide;
Once more we hear the battle cry
Of "Ride 'im, cowboy, ride!"

It's rodeo time and far and wide
We interview our maps,
Where dusty cowboys draw their ride
And buckle up the straps.

Once more we leave the store and home
To greet the good old crew;
He's riding in from plain and dome,
Our pal—the Buckaroo.

Let April wed the May time,
And Spring divorce remorse;
Let's take an equine playtime
And follow old King Horse.

*Olive Oldham, Bakersfield, Calif.*

## The Wild Stallion

AS still as a graven image, he stands on the mesa rim,
Born to a life of freedom, not for servitude to men,
A picture of latent power, a striking majestic sight
To see it change at the hint of danger to a wild thunderous flight.

See how his mane is flowing, how his tail streams in the wind
He's putting the distance behind him, he knows that he hasn't a friend
Both man and beast are against him, but he's never been caught off guard
A suspicious sound or unfriendly move, he's off and he's running hard.

Always on watch for the hunter, he's endlessly testing the wind,
Dodging the traps of the wranglers, but he's wild and free to the end;
Wary and strong, he's fighting for the life that he loves the best;
The beautiful noble wild stallion, may he always be part of the West.

*Elmer E. Brown, Ridgeview, W. Va.*

## Triangle

THERE was a charming *señorita*
With flashing teeth and eye,
All the men who looked at her
Just kissed their hearts good-by.

Nell was just a cowgirl
Who could ride and rope and shoot,
But she seldom had a date,
For men she didn't give a hoot.

The *señorita*, Nell, and a cowboy
Met one night in June,
Just two girls and a cowboy
Beneath the silvery moon.

Nell knew right from the start
That she loved this buckaroo
But she knew just as well
The *señorita* loved him, too.

The cowboy flirted first with Nell
Then with the Spanish miss,
And devil that he was,
From each he stole a kiss.

The *señorita* used her charm
And the cowboy sure fell,
But somehow in the end
He up and married Nell.

*Edith Zink, Baltimore, Md.*

# OUR AIR MAIL

*"Our Air mail" has for years been running between readers of Ranch Romances and has enabled many people to make worth-while friends. You may write DIRECTLY to anyone whose letter is printed in this department. Remember that all letters should reflect the clean, wholesome spirit of Ranch Romances and contain nothing objectionable. The address given are complete. If no country is mentioned, it is the U. S. A.*

*This department is intended only for those who actually wish correspondents. We ask you therefore to refrain from using it as a medium for playing jokes and particularly request you do not sign your letters with other people's names. Address letters for publication to "Our Air Mail," Ranch Romances, 515 Madison Ave., New York.*

### A "What-not" Collector!

*Dear Editor:*
*I am a lonely farm girl looking for a pen pal. I read RANCH ROMANCES as much as I can and think they're very good. I am a girl of 11, and have blond hair and blue eyes. My hobbies are collecting "what-nots," seeing movies and riding a bike. Would like to hear from boys and girls all over the world.*

*MARY LOU WEST*

*R. 1,*
*Hornbrook, Iowa*

### Lonely Widow

*Dear Editor:*
*I am a steady reader of RANCH ROMANCES and would love to have pen pals. I am a widow of 49 years old, have no children and am very lonesome. I've brown hair and blue eyes. Hope you can help me find some new friends.*

*ETHEL HEUSER*

*1428 W. Jackson St.,*
*Indianapolis, Ind*

### Here's a Home Body!

*Dear Editor:*
*I live in a city and I don't skate or dance so the nights are pretty lonely. I have brown hair and blue eyes and am 38 years old. I enjoy housework, cooking and knitting. Come on, fellows about 40, and I'll answer all you letters.*

*KAY PILKINER*

*91 Aladdin St., N.*
*Galt, Ontario, Canada*

### Shorty!

*Dear Editor:*
*I am interested in exchanging letters with anyone and everyone. I am a girl of 17 with brown hair and eyes. My height is anything but short, I am about five feet eleven or six feet! I like all kinds of sports. My nickname is Shorty. Hoping for lots of letters to make me a lot happier.*

*MARJORIE PEARNE*

*R. F. D. 1, Box 126,*
*Biggs, Calif.*

### Three High School Seniors

*Dear Editor:*
*We are three girls who would like to have pen pals. All of us are seniors in high school. Alice is 17, has brown eyes and brown hair. Bevy is 17, has blond hair and blue eyes. Mildred is 17, has green eyes and auburn hair. We are especially interested in dancing, horseback riding and all kinds of sports, and of course we like to write letters and promise to answer every letter we receive.*

*ALICE LEE TERRY*
*BEVY JO JACKSON*
*MILDRED J. HULL*

*Carber, Mo.*

### Lonely Housewife

*Dear Editor:*
*I'm a very lonely housewife who'd like to join your letter-writing friends. My husband works nights, therefore my evenings seem endless. So please help me to get oodles of pen pals. I am 24, have black wavy hair and brown eyes. Enjoy swimming, dancing and singing. My hobby is cowboy songs of which I've a great many to exchange with pen pals. I won't someone drop me a line?*

*MRS. STELLA PARKER*

*2346 Angeles Ave.,*
*San Gabriel, Calif*

### Canadian Miss

*Dear Editor:*
*I've been a constant reader of RANCH ROMANCES for some time and enjoy it very much. I would like to correspond with some of your readers and exchange snapshots with them. I've several hobbies such as collecting postcards, stamps and match covers, all outdoor sports and dancing. I'm 19, have gray eyes and dark brown hair. I'll answer all letters promptly, so let's see you keep me busy.*

*PATRICIA ROWLAND*

*R. R. 3,*
*Belleville, Ontario, Canada*



### Two Dotties

*Dear Editor,*
*We are two young girls of 17 who live in a small town. We'd like to acquire pen pals to help shorten those long winter evenings. We both answer to the name "Dottie" and have the same interests: sports, music, dancing and good poetry. Dottie B. is a red-haired blonde; Dottie H. is dark. We're both five feet six. We're competing to see whose mail box is filled first.*

*DOROTHY HECKMAN*
*DOROTHY BECKER*

*Maine St.,*
*Shoemakersville, Penna.*

### Second Try

*Dear Editor:*
*I'm a lonely Western gal who would appreciate lots of letters. This is the second time I've tried to enter "Our Air Mail," so please don't disappoint me. I am 15, with light brown hair and blue eyes. I sure do enjoy reading RANCH ROMANCES. Please pals, send some letters my way.*

*MARTY LACKEY*

*R. 4, Box 813-B,*
*Tacoma, Wash.*

### A Rancheress

*Dear Editor:*
*I'd like to enter my plea for pen pals. May I? I am 16, have black hair and brown eyes. I live on a ranch. Enjoy collecting postcards, pictures and writing letters. Come on, pals, fill my mailbox. I'll answer every letter and send snaps to those who desire them. Enjoy reading RANCH ROMANCES so very much.*

*DIXIE SCHROEDER*

*R. 1, Box 172,*
*McFarland, Calif.*

### Lonely Cowgirl

*Dear Editor:*
*How's chances of a lonely young cowgirl getting a few pals? I am 14, with brown hair and blue eyes. I was born and raised on a Montana ranch and am still living on one. My favorite pastimes are horseback riding, wrangling cattle and singing cowboy songs. Would like to hear from people interested in same things. Won't you please write?*

*POLLY LUTTES*

*Box 1104,*
*San Benito, Texas*

### Seasoned Traveler

*Dear Editor:*
*I am a 19 year-old fellow who loves to write letters and collect postcards. I've been all over Europe and Asia and spent 18 years there. I can tell a great many stories of my travels and adventures there. Would like to write to fellows and girls of all ages. How about writing to me, pals?*

*JAMES K. KRAUSS*

*65 E. Madison St.,*
*Malden, Mass.*

### Just Lonesome

*Dear Editor:*
*Just a line or two asking for correspondence from either sex. I am 21 years of age, have brown hair and eyes. My mother passed away last spring and I get so lonesome that I'd like someone to write to, to help pass away the time.*

*MARGUERITE BALLARD*

*Box 67,*
*Vimy, Alberta, Canada*

### Lonesome Widow

*Dear Editor,*
*I am a regular reader of RANCH ROMANCES and think they're just grand. I am a widow of 43 and get very lonesome some times. I have three children, but all are married. Though I have a job and have a house to take care of, I still have time to write. Would like to hear from men and women around my age.*

*MRS. JULIA GREGORY*

*Rutherfordton, N. C.*

### Western Fan

*Dear Editor:*
*Hope you'll be kind enough to print my plea. I am 15 and have lived in Canton all my life. I hope that some day I'll be able to go out West because I love it. I love horses, and prairies also. Would like to hear from cowboys, cowgirls, ranchers and cattlemen, and I promise to answer all letters.*

*ROOTS SHREFFLER*

*616 Seventh St., N. E.,*
*Canton, Ohio*

### Likes to Bowl

*Dear Editor,*
*I'm a girl of 25, have dark brown hair and blue eyes. My favorite sport is bowling. Have been reading RANCH ROMANCES for several years and I think they are swell. I imagine it'll be lots of fun writing to pen pals. Everyone is welcome to write.*

*GLADYS MILLER*

*1118 Weller Ave.*
*Louisville, Ky.*

### Young Married Woman

*Dear Editor,*
*I have been reading RANCH ROMANCES for a long time and enjoy them very much. I'm a young married woman of 20, have brown hair and blue eyes. My favorite hobbies are collecting Western and train songs and writing letters. Would like to hear from single or married girls between the ages of 16 and 25. Will try to answer all letters immediately.*

*VIOLA E. MORRIS*

*Dyer, Ind.*

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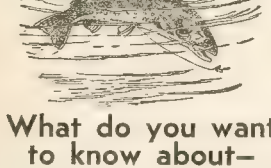

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# OUR AIR MAIL

### Attractive Model

*Dear Editor:*

*How about some of you fellows between 22 and 30 writing to me? I'm a gal who is tall, slim, has natural curly shoulder length honey-brown hair and blue eyes. My profession as a model in a style shop demands that I be attractive. I've too many hobbies to mention, but I promise to answer all letters. So come on, fellows, I'll be waiting!*

*LESLIE BARKER, JR.*

*39 Lilac St.,*
*New Haven, Conn.*

### Steady Reader

*Dear Editor:*

*I'm a steady reader of your magazine and like it very much. Would like to have a host of pen pals as I've plenty of time to write and will answer all letters and enclose a snapshot to writers of the first five letters I receive. I'm blond and have blue eyes, like dancing, skating and reading.*

*VERLA SCHOUTEN*

*418 6th St., N. W.,*
*Minot, N. D.*

### Red-Headed Kansan

*Dear Editor:*

*Please print this! I'm a red-headed, brown-eyed girl from the sticks of Kansas. Am 17, and love to read the Double R's. Come on, pen pals, throw some ink my way.*

*JOYCE ALLEN*

*St. Francis, Kans.*

### Lonely Hoosier

*Dear Editor:*

*Do you have a little space for a lonely Hoosier from a small town on the Ohio River? I am 25, have blue eyes and dark brown hair and am anxious to make friends everywhere. Especially girls near my own age. I promise to answer all letters.*

*CHARLES DAVIS*

*415 4th St.,*
*Rising Sun, Ind.*

### Play a Guitar?

*Dear Editor:*

*Is there room for a young Canadian miss? I'm 17 and have brown hair and eyes. My hobbies are collecting photographs, skating, horseback riding and dancing. I play a guitar and would like to hear from boys and girls who play guitars and sing cowboy songs.*

*ANNE DOBKO*

*R. R. 3,*
*Calmar, Alberta, Canada*

### Third Time Brings Success

*Dear Editor:*

*This is the third time I've tried to crash "Our Air Mail," and I hope I'll win. They always say the third time brings success. I'm 16, have red hair and blue eyes. My hobbies are collecting jokes, funny short stories and match books. Like most outdoor sports, and would like to hear from boys and girls from 15 to 25.*

*LUCILE PAPE*

*Box 109, R. R. 3, R.F.D.,*
*Independence, Wisc.*

### Nurse in a Hospital

*Dear Editor:*

*I have always wished to make new friends through correspondence so at last I am trying to crash your worthwhile friend-maker column. I am 18, have blond hair and blue eyes, and I work as a nurse in a hospital. Would like to hear from everyone. So come on, pen pals, flood my mailbox with letters I'll answer all letters and exchange snapshots.*

*KATHLYN HALL*

*250 E. Cherry St.,*
*McLeansboro Hospital,*
*McLeansboro, Ill.*

### Lonely Lad

*Dear Editor,*

*I am 17 and have red hair and brown eyes. Would like to correspond with boys and girls between 15 and 19. So come, everybody give a lonely lad a show.*

*CARL McBAIN*

*New Freeman Hotel,*
*Black River Falls, Wisc.*

# Trail's End Roll Call

From all points of the compass, members flock to the fold of the Trail's End Club. Welcome, newcomers!

Mr. Wayne Aldrich, c/o Pete Copes, Garberville, Calif.
Miss Vera Alfonso, Chalmette P. O., Chalmette, La.
Mr. Frank Baxter, Bessemer City, Box 93, N. C.
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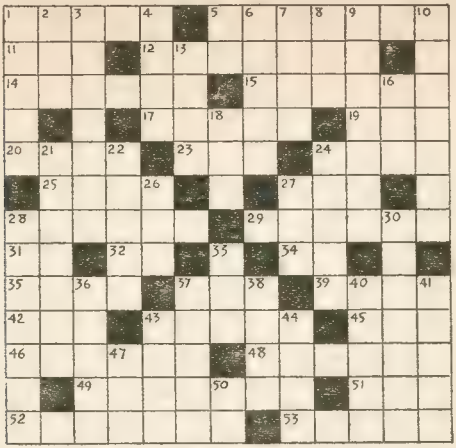
# . The Westerners' Crossword Puzzle .



*The solution to this puzzle will appear in the next issue.*

## ACROSS

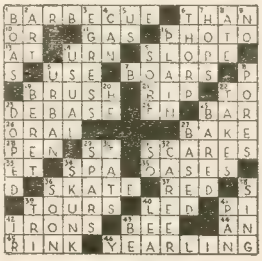
1. A group of horses at a roundup
5. A half-wild horse of the Texan plains
11. Exist
12. Made of earth
14. A current of water
15. To convert into small electrical particles
17. To ransack
19. A large flightless bird of New Zealand
20. A strong, low wagon
23. A female deer
24. The principal room of a Greek temple
25. Enough (Archaic)
27. A speck
28. A code of ceremonies
29. To discourage
31. A printer's measure
32. Railway (Abbrev.)
34. I and another
35. Certain
37. The cry of a sheep
39. Sinks in the middle
42. Unreduced metal
43. Insipid
45. The stomach
46. Contracts for property

## DEFINITIONS

48. A long, narrow pass
49. To punish
51. To place a golf ball for play
52. An arrangement of troops in the form of steps
53. An appointment to meet

## DOWN

1. Boxed
2. Skill
3. Green
4. Twelve months
5. Mister (Abbrev.)
6. Practical
7. A covering for the foot
8. Twice five
9. To give life to
10. Covers with an oily matter
13. Among
16. A zoological garden
18. One notorious for cunning
21. To reaccustom
22. You are (Contr.)
24. Short letters
26. A road
27. Moisture from the air
28. To decide
30. Entertains
33. A break in a fence
36. To extend
37. The deepest male voice
38. An assistant
40. Good will
41. Pleasing to the taste
43. The flesh of a calf
44. To mark by a blow
47. A feminine pronoun
50. Ton (Abbrev.)



*Solution to Second February Puzzle*

# WHOM SHALL I MARRY?

**By Professor Marcus Mari**

THE STARS . . . THE WAR . . . AND YOU

*Girl of Pisces—Feb. 19-March 21*

BORN under a benign and gentle sign, the Girl of Pisces seems always to be serene, but this outward show of serenity conceals a volatile, temperamental nature. She is sensitively fond of art and beauty, and her capacity for detail inclines her to the more delicate things of life.

She makes an excellent homemaker, a fine designer of clothes, a conscientious community worker. Her large sympathies and her strong beliefs make her invaluable in the war effort. She would excell in nursery work, that is attending the children of defense-working mothers. She has a natural way with children, and they respond to her quiet charm. Too, she would make a sympathetic nurse, and Pisces, meaning the Sign of the Two Fish, gives her a nautical leaning, and often brings her extensive travels. Invariably she is endowed with exquisite grace.

Being cautious by nature, and even inclined to be somewhat wary and afraid of big chances, the Pisces girl has good control of her own heart. When she chooses her mate, she knows exactly what she is doing, and seldom falls into the emotional traps that await her more impetuous sisters.

Perhaps her most enviable trait is her ability to adjust herself to sudden changes in environment. She need have no fears about changing her pattern of life; she will be able always to leave one mode of life and enter happily upon another—a gift which makes her particularly valuable to her country in these days of sudden changes of life and occupation.

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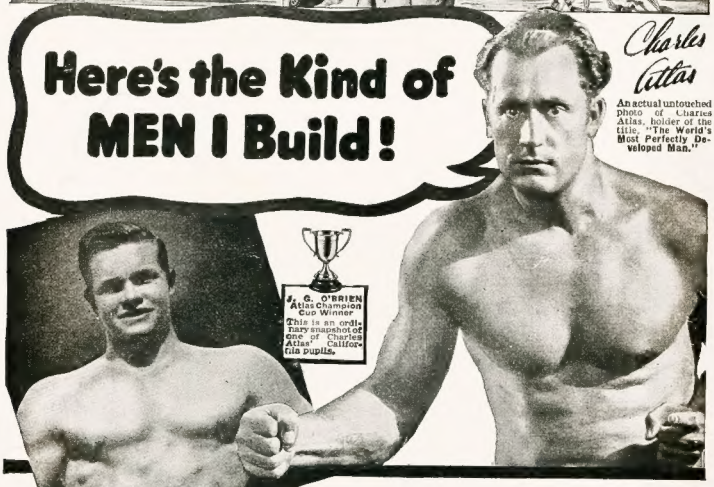
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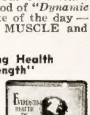


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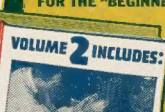

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